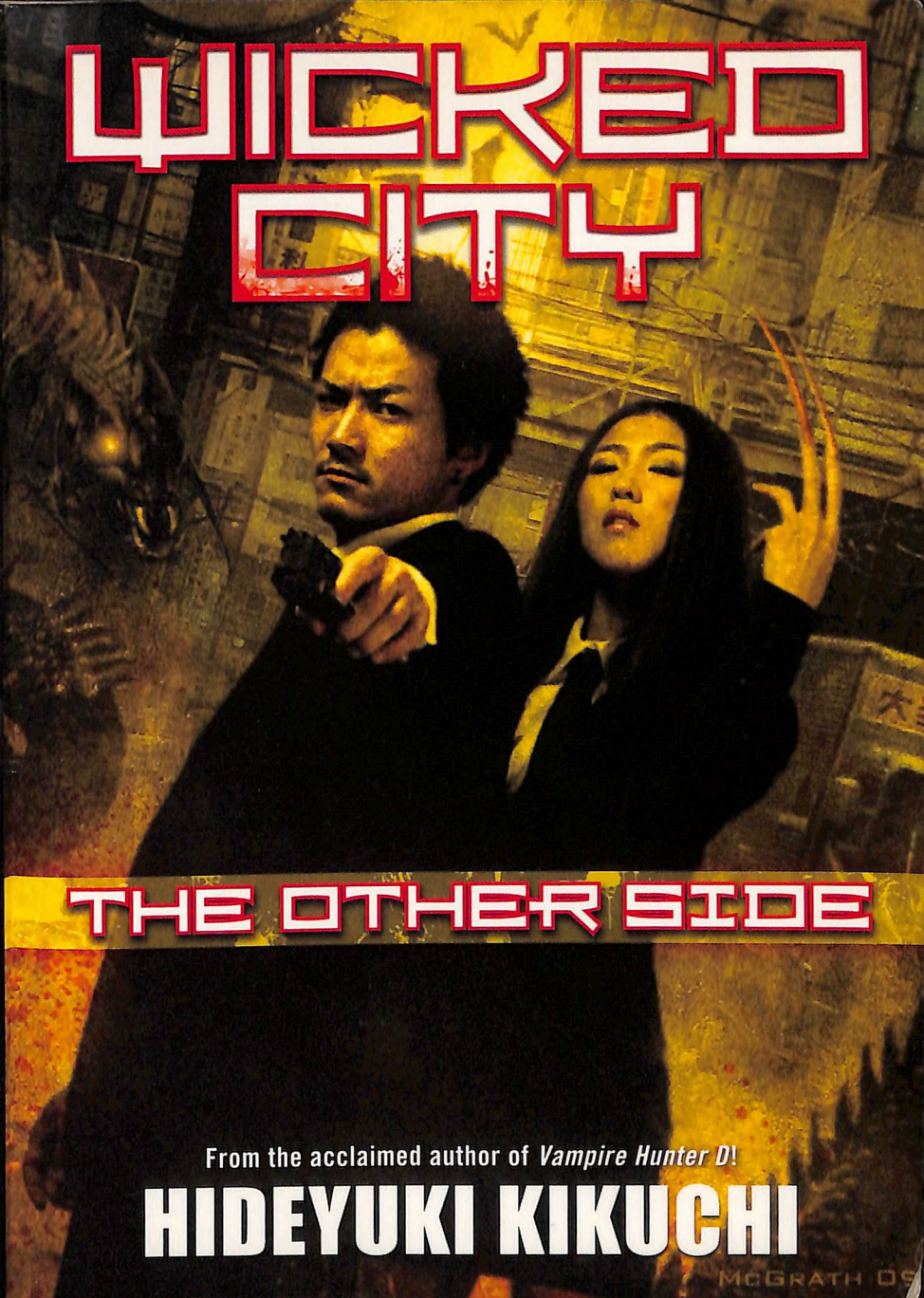
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WICKED CITY

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HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

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WICKED CITY: THE OTHER SIDE

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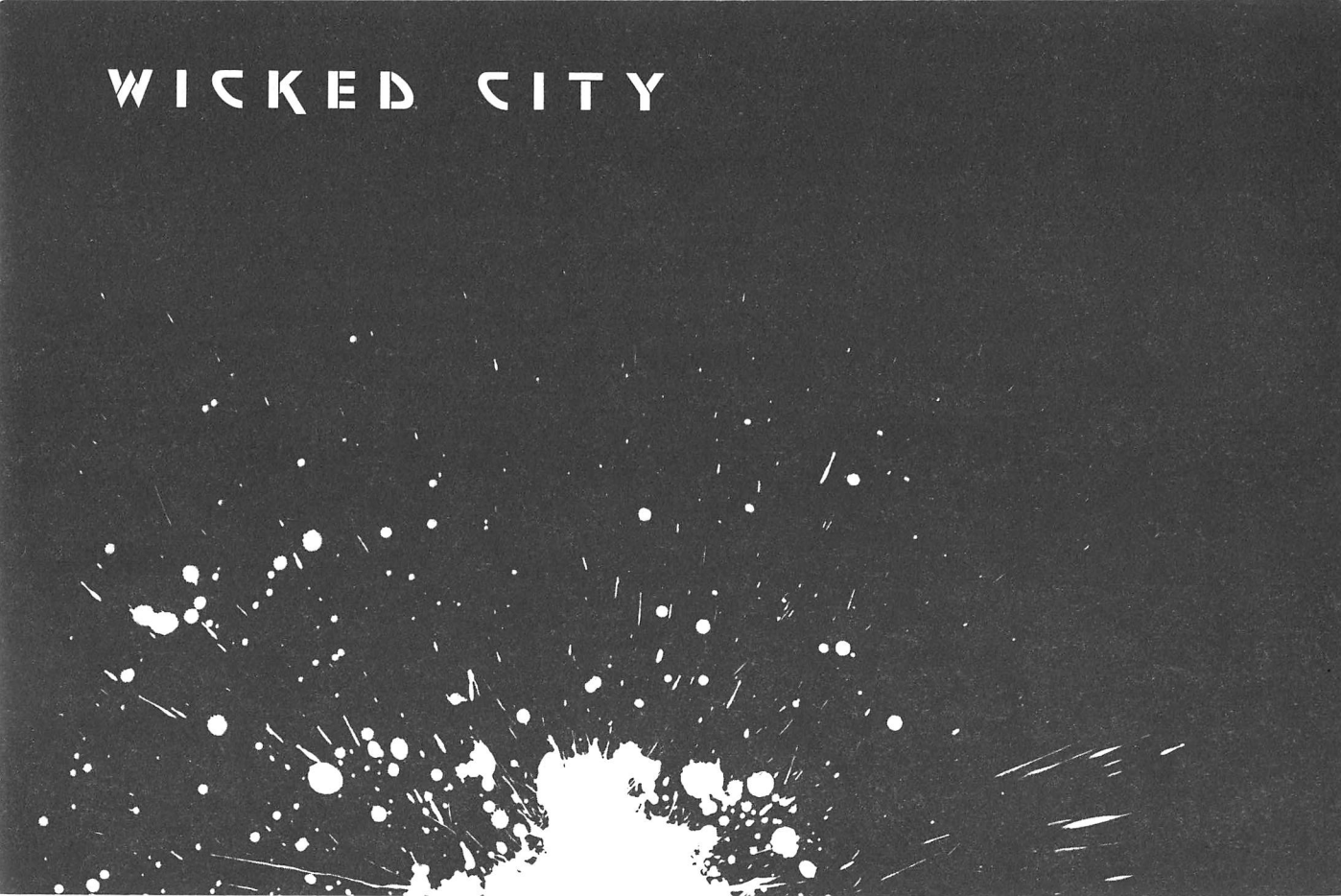
WICKED CITY



DIRTY DREAM

CHAPTER ONE

1

TAKASUGI KAORI lay in bed, asleep, and dreamed she was being raped. She had gone to bed early so she would be asleep when Shiego, her husband, came home, and he wouldn't paw at her, like he always did.

In the dream she was in the living room. It was a place where she often pleasured herself when she was alone; she liked it better on the floor than in the chair. She was on the floor now, naked and on all fours. Despite the fact that she was being fucked violently against her will, the dream was highly erotic and made her feel oddly self-assured.

I'm so hot. No man can resist me.

Kaori was twenty-seven years old, which made her

young enough to still be desired by men, but old enough to know what she was doing in bed. And she did it extremely well. Kaori wasn't just the voice of experience, she was an out-and-out slut. She loved sex, loved to feel a man pumping his cock into her. Many different men, if the truth were to be told. With big hips and thighs to die for, Kaori was every man's dream woman.

Who wouldn't want a taste of this piece of ass?

The idea of men wanting her always aroused her, and men were happy to oblige her appetite. Blessed with a shapely figure and a beautiful face, Kaori had taken up modeling part-time while still in high school. After she graduated from junior college, it became her profession. Her big eyes and straight nose made her appear sweet and intelligent, while her full lips added a hint of sensuality. Classy and dirty—the perfect mix for a bikini model.

She knew modeling bikinis was sexier than posing naked for one of those men's porno magazines. What's sexier than a naked woman? A woman in a bikini, posing for the camera. Sure, men want to see every inch of the female body, but they also love to be teased. Bikinis cover nipples and the groin area—the juicy bits—while unabashedly displaying the legs and the soft mounds of flesh that hint at what's underneath the fabric. Bikinis are a tease, a taunt, a promise of something more. The wickedest part is that women love flaunting their bodies and turning men on. They hide behind the flimsy bikini because they love being cock teasers.

Oh, the agony the crew had to go through during

Kaori's photo shoots. There she was, wearing so little and striking a pose right in front of them. All they could do was gawk at the bikini babe, sticking out her tits and gyrating. The bathing suit was held together by nothing but strings. Unravel them and she was naked—the temptation was excruciating. Most of Kaori's flesh was already exposed. Not much left to imagine, but enough to get most of the crew hard five seconds into the shoot.

She was such a slut she had slept with some of them—cameramen, lighting assistants, even drivers. Sometimes she took one to a hotel; sometimes she did one in the studio after shooting wrapped. Some sneaked into her dressing room while she was changing and fucked her standing up.

The more degrading the sex, the hotter it made Kaori. She was a woman of passion. Once she and her date drove deep into the forest in Okutama, where she had him fuck her from behind, moaning and writhing until she passed out. She didn't mind the grass stain on her 300,000 yen suit, or the fact three hikers watched in the distance—it only turned her on.

Kaori had met Shiego during one of her photo shoots. After they were married, three years ago, he made her quit modeling. So lately her life was lacking in action. She noticed the looks she got from young salesmen or the cleaning boy. They came around pretty much every day and always gave her breasts and buttocks a lingering stare. But she knew better than to start anything with them. That could lead to trouble, though she couldn't say she hadn't

fantasized about them while she masturbated on the living room floor. She took care of her needs by herself. It was efficient and harmless. Having a dirty dream was just another way of doing it, she supposed.

In this dream, Kaori was being raped from behind, her favorite position. The man—she couldn't see him—rammed his cock into her, fucking her hard. Her ass had given ecstasy to hundreds of men; it had the scar of a bite mark to prove it. No man could keep himself from wanting her after seeing her shake her ass once or twice.

Her dream rapist's cock, which was rock-hard and huge, drilled into her pussy, filling her dripping-wet vagina. His penis was covered with coarse hairs, which scratched her sensitive membranes with every in-and-out. It made her shiver.

God, that feels good.

"This is how you like it, huh?" The man asked in a rough voice.

"Oh, y . . . yes . . ." She struggled to form the word. It was so hard to describe the pleasure he gave her. "Don't stop. Fuck me harder."

The rapist was happy to do so, forcing her forward with every thrust, rubbing her clit with his dick. She wanted to shout from the top of her lungs, scream in ecstasy. His cock was making her melt. She wished he would peel off the flesh of her pussy with his dick. The world was milky and in a vortex of chaos. Everything was a blur and flashes of light.

Something soft was placed on her moaning lips. She instantly recognized it—another cock.

A man with two penises. *Anything can happen in a dream*, she thought. The penis throbbed, itching to penetrate her mouth.

Kaori grabbed it and put it between her lips. It snaked its way down her throat. She didn't find it disgusting—instead she was overtaken with lust.

She moved her mouth up and down the shaft, her mouth puckered, brows knitted. She knew the look aroused men, and she was a good entertainer.

The penis swelled in her mouth and grew hard. "Great head. This isn't your first time, is it?" the voice said with a groan. "But I am here to please you."

His thrusting picked up speed, his dick penetrating her even more roughly.

She pulled her mouth from the cock, sucking the very end as she did. "Ah!" she cried. The stubbly hairs scratched the inner walls of her vagina. Her pussy was so wet she felt her own juices dripping down her thighs. It turned her on even more.

"I'm going to die. I'm going to die. Don't stop! I'm coming!"

"Come. But not before you look me in the eye."

She put the other penis back into her mouth and began to suck again. She opened her eyes and let out a scream.

He was a beauty like no other. His glittering red eyes had no pupils. They were filled with both hatred and

lust. He didn't have nostrils but breathed heavily through his mouth. Purple fangs grew from the protruding chin. His skin crawled with countless moving things, like small waves. Kaori looked closer. She finally realized what was on his face, and she sighed in rapture.

Maggots covered his entire face. Alive and wiggling.

They must be all over his penis, too. She pictured the worms eating her moist vagina, and the thought sent shivers down her spine.

"More. *More.*" She repeated the word she had never said to her husband.

"As you please."

She came again and again as the beautiful lover in her dream did things to her that she wouldn't have even imagined in real life.

2

TAMIYA YOSAKU dreamed he was getting a mind-bending blow job. He stood while she sucked his cock. She was on her knees. Naked. Like a slave. The dream had apparently brought out his dominant side. Her brows were contracted in a frown, and her lips were puckered. Just the way men like.

He had come twice already, and she swallowed each time, relishing the taste of him. He was determined to

dump another load, this one right on her face. The thought of smearing that prettiness with his own semen made his penis swell bigger than he had imagined possible.

One of her hands was on his ass cheek, so she could push him farther into her mouth. The other hovered over his asshole, her fingertip tapping the wrinkled orifice in a perfect rhythm. Tamiya couldn't contain himself. He was moaning like crazy.

It was literally a dream come true for him. For an ordinary forty-five-year-old man, getting laid was tough—and getting a good blow job damn near impossible. It was happening in his dream, though, and with a woman more beautiful than he could imagine.

He had a family, a wife and kids. His wife, Yoshiko, was thirty-eight years old. Tamiya secretly called her "Pigtarian, blood type Oink." She was short, just four foot eleven, and weighed a hundred pounds. Whenever she went down on him, which was almost never, he made a point of closing his eyes, safely protected from the pathetic sight of her giant ass sticking up in the air.

"How am I doing?" the woman asked, letting his penis drop.

A note of urgency entered his voice. "D-don't stop. Keep doing it." He grabbed her by the hair and pushed her head back to his penis.

She opened her mouth wide and started sucking on the head of his cock in a rapid in-and-out motion.

It was horrible. He was hanging near the edge for the third time. "Keep at it. Don't stop."

Now his cock was all the way inside her mouth. The wet licking sound she made was enough to make him come all by itself.

"Where do you want to come?" She lifted her head, his penis still in her mouth.

"On your face."

"Do it."

With that, she buried her face in his crotch and sucked his cock with more enthusiasm. She pulled her head back and waited. Something hot boiled up in his balls. Jets of thick white liquid spurted onto her face.

"I did it . . ."

"You did it," she said.

The woman lapped up the cum that dripped from her mouth. Her tongue extended like a snake. She licked the residue off her left eyelid. Her weathered skin was grayish, and her mouth was a slit from ear to ear, in the shape of a half moon.

Her fangs were bared. *They seem just sharp enough for a good rubdown*, Tamiya thought, an instant before the tips of her fangs bit into the head of his cock.

Tamiya shuddered. He knew this was just a dream. But the pain seemed so real.

The woman pulled back her head, grinning.

"Ugh!" he yelled as he looked at his cock. Two lines ran along the length of his shaft, blood sputtering from the pinkish inner flesh. His penis was all cut up and bloody, pulsing with horrible vigor. The pain brought him closer

and closer once more, and finally he exploded again into her disfigured mouth.

He was struck with a strong need for that woman. He would be lost without her.

Her lips curved up in a smile. She understood him. Her expression filled with wicked confidence.

3

THE MAN laughed as he raped Takasugi Kaori.

The woman let out a hysterical laugh as she fucked Tamiya Yosaku with her mouth.

All of it happened in the realm of dreams. The two laughing voices mingled and became one and echoed inside the head of another man, miles away.

The man woke up screaming, making the cracked window glass rattle in its frame. The dream had felt so real; the laughter had sounded like it had come from his own room. He shot upright on the futon as terror gripped him. He sweated profusely, his perspiration smelling of liquor. He was very drunk.

He roughly wiped his face and neck with a steamy towel that lay by the pillow and reached for something beside the bed. He didn't have to look for it; he knew exactly where it was. The comforting feel of the object was all

too familiar. Without even bothering to open the cap, he brought the bottle of cheap whisky to his mouth.

He took a gulp and felt the liquid burn his throat on the way down.

Fuck off, he said inwardly. It didn't do anything to calm his nerves. The laughter was still there. The mingled voices sounded so familiar. The revelation of where he had heard them before hit him hard like a bolt out of the blue, and his fear turned to terror.

"Here comes trouble," he muttered. His words slurred, teeth grinding together, tongue tied in a knot. Had his drinking affected his speech? Or was it just that he was scared shitless? He couldn't tell.

"It's starting all over. Who's unleashed that son of a bitch?"

His mumbling was interrupted by a bang on the door and an obnoxiously loud voice.

"Hey, keep it down, will you? This is going on every night," said the housewife from next door. "You're driving me up the wall. I'm telling you, one more scream like that, and I'll ask the landlady to kick you out!"

She slammed the door to her apartment, which made the door to his shake violently. The housewife let out a yelp of shock—obviously she thought he had made the noise on purpose. A second later, she yelled at him again. "I don't believe this! If you think this is over, you're wrong!!"

He listened to her footfalls fading in the distance toward the stairway, then reached out and felt around for the bottle

he had chucked aside. He could tell by how light it felt that it was empty. He picked up another bottle—also empty. Then another and another. Not a drop in any of them.

A feeling of dread came over him. Not only was he out of liquor, he was all out of pills. He scratched his head, his nails scraping off fragments of flesh. *Who'd unleashed that freak anyway?*

His body ached, and it felt as if pins and needles had been driven into every inch of his flesh. His blood started losing heat. *Damn, I never got over this*, he thought.

He stood and looked around the apartment. First thing in the morning he had to find a job, or else he would starve. He couldn't even afford a can of beer from a vending machine. Perhaps he could borrow a hammer from the landlady and go to the vending machine with it and . . . No, no more borrowing.

There was a supermarket around the corner. Maybe . . . He grasped at one last straw.

Yes, that store was open around the clock. There were two clerks. *Nothing I couldn't handle. I'll take one hostage and—*

His bloodshot eyes turned to the small kitchen. He slid a stainless steel knife from the drawer, wrapped it in a towel, and stuffed the bundle inside his shirt. He was on his way to the front door—then stopped. The sound of stomping feet came closer.

4

Kuo Shinpei had known for some time that something was not quite right with his wife. For the last four or five days, it seemed like she was in a daze. Perhaps she was not getting enough sleep. At thirty-six, she was too young for dementia, and she was lucid. If he asked her a question, she answered him. No new antics, either.

Still, she had been acting, well, weird, for lack of a better word, and it had not escaped Shinpei's notice. When they talked about their children's school, she would get this odd look in her eyes, like she didn't recognize him. She laughed watching television, but her mind was elsewhere.

Could it be another man that was on her mind? The thought had crossed Shinpei's mind more than once, and it pissed him off. Shinpei liked having sex with Naoko and enjoyed every minute of it. Standing at four foot eleven, Shinpei was a very small man, while Naoko, at five foot seven, was tall and busty. Her body alone was a huge turn-on for him. Her breasts were not big, but she had wide, meaty hips. Oh, those soft white mounds. He liked to do her on her hands and knees. He loved the erotic sound of two bodies slapping together.

She was a stuck-up little whore when it came to sex. She didn't make the first move, but she never turned him

down. She was always ready, and she liked it rough. He could make her beg even during foreplay. Her ass was one of her best attributes, and she knew it. Doggy-style was her favorite position. As part of their foreplay ritual, she would stick her buttocks up in the air and shake them while Shinpei stroked himself.

All that had changed four days ago. After sending their kids off to school, he went to the kitchen. Naoko was doing dishes, her ass shaking rhythmically as she scrubbed each plate. He felt his cock begin to swell. He grabbed her ass with both hands.

She slapped him away. "No!"

That night, when he made a move, she had already fallen asleep. That never happened. The next night his doubt became conviction—she was definitely sleeping with someone else. Shinpei climbed into bed, and once again, Naoko was sound asleep. Irritated, Shinpei stuck his hand up under her nightgown and ran his fingers along her inner thighs. It was her weak spot. Soon her body started to tremble. He looked into her face. It was contorted in an expression of passion. It was the one Shinpei looked forward to, because it meant she was ready.

He bent down and licked her thighs until they were nice and wet, then slid her panties down. Her female shrine was protected by dense forest, but it was red, ripe, and wet.

Shinpei placed his cock above her face. He was rock hard. He expected her to grab him and wrap her lips around it as she had always done. However—

"I said no!" She was very adamant, her voice shuddering in horror.

"What? Suck my dick."

He pressed his crotch against her face and put his own close to her pussy. He started to lick her noisily, his nose squashed against her. The feel of the hot, soft flesh never failed to send blood rushing into his penis.

"Stop it, idiot!"

Naoko pushed him aside. Shinpei looked up, startled, and rubbed his eyes. Naoko closed her thighs and cleaned her crotch with the edge of her nightgown.

That was it. He lost it when he saw her wiping his saliva off. He jumped onto her without a word and turned her onto her stomach. She fought him with strength he had never imagined she had. The sight of her ample hips shaking violently, of her struggling with him, did nothing but add to his excitement.

He held her down, spread her legs, and pushed himself into her. Not a whimper from her, but she continued to struggle. This should have been the part where she wiggled her ass seductively, getting him in the mood. But no such luck. She had made it clear she didn't want him.

His despair somehow got him off quickly. He came with a shudder, unloading himself deep inside her. Shinpei, for the first time, felt anxious about their future.

The following morning, Shinpei left the house early with a bag in his hand. He had told Naoko that he would be away on business for a few days and had submitted a request for a five-day vacation to his boss. He walked

around the corner and changed into a T-shirt and windbreaker. Then he went to the car rental place two blocks up from his house and rented a Corolla.

He drove back to his house and parked across the street and a few houses away and watched from the Corolla. He had told Naoko that he would call her regularly while he was away. She was always at home whenever Shinpei got home early, so he figured whoever was banging her must be a freelancer. If she really was having an affair, this was a perfect time. The coast was clear. No husband to worry about. It had to be today, and it had to happen at this hour, when he was usually on the train to work.

He was willing to stake out his own house for five days if he had to. He was overwhelmed with jealousy. Just the thought of another man touching Naoko's gorgeous body was outrageous.

It was fifty minutes past eleven. Shinpei had parked the car an hour ago. In this quiet suburban neighborhood in the Shirokane district, there weren't a lot of people on the street. He had seen no more than ten door-to-door salesmen or housewives walking with their children. Some he recognized, and Shinpei quickly covered his face with a handkerchief and faked sleeping when someone he knew passed the car.

If Naoko and her lover were going to meet outside the house, she should leave around noon. Assuming her lover had a white-collar job, the lunch break was all the time they had. Shinpei snorted. Making love against the clock

would add an extra thrill to their affair. A deep, slow fuck at night and a quickie during the day. That was her kind of game, he thought.

Seeing a housewife from his neighborhood come in the direction of his car, Shinpei slid the handkerchief farther down. Through the gap between the handkerchief and the car's roof, he saw their Laurel leaving the house, Naoko behind the wheel.

He was right—she *was* having an affair. His blood pumped harder. Shinpei trailed their beloved car, following it toward Komazawa Street.

An hour before lunch break, the street was less crowded than he expected. The Laurel proceeded toward the Shibuya district.

Where was their love nest? Shinpei's heart ached. He pictured his wife's generous body in some strange man's arms, shuddering in pleasure, her creamy, meaty thighs writhing and twisting. She was irresistible. Men would love to have her twice a day at least. She was game for it anytime, day or night.

Naoko loved having a cock in her mouth, loved getting Shinpei off with that mouth that had pleased his cock again and again. She knew how to perform. She stuck out her tongue, and no penis would stay placid. She could order him to come whenever she wanted. Naoko was the kind of woman who didn't mind having a man come in her mouth. She swallowed with great enthusiasm.

Shinpei imagined white liquid streaming from the corner of her mouth, and a hot sensation crossed his crotch.

He rubbed his cock, thinking about Naoko sucking him. He would come in his shorts if he wasn't careful. Quickly he unzipped his pants, whipped out his dick, and dumped his load onto the floor of the car.

Naoko drove into Shibuya. She guided the car into a parking lot beneath Miyashita Park and headed toward the station. Shinpei parked his car and followed her.

She didn't have a clue that he was behind her. Many heads turned as she walked by, shaking her marvelous hips. Those luscious mounds were about to be handed to another man, and suddenly her ass seemed sexier than ever before. Shinpei swallowed hard.

He had expected her to go across the street, continuing on her way to the station, but Naoko turned right, walked one block, and turned right again. She continued down the street, the Seibu department store on her left, and went into the Taiseido bookstore.

That's odd, he thought. Did her lover work in the bookstore?

The escalator carried her gorgeous body upstairs. Instead of following her, he decided to watch from afar. Naoko got off on the second floor.

"Got you." Shinpei jumped onto the iron step and rode up.

5

TAISEIDO WAS so large it was called a "book department store." The second floor, though, was a rented office. The plate on the office door read RAISU ELECTRONICS: SHIBUYA. Just to be on the safe side, Shinpei glanced at the escalator to see if his wife was going farther up.

He was trying to work out her schedule. It was half past noon now. Most people would be out for lunch. Was her lover in charge of the office? Was she offering up her ass to some guy in a shady corner of some office? Anyone could walk in any minute!

That would just turn her on.

Shinpei decided to wait around for a while. The plan was to catch her in the act. He imagined her and her lover, devouring each other's mouths without so much as a hello.

In his head the man was well-built and taller than Naoko. He imaged the man forcefully bending Naoko over the desk, so that she was on her stomach. Her panties—there was no way they were white. Blue, maybe? No—purple. Her ass crack was visible through the thin fabric. The man yanked them down, got on his knees, and started kissing her vagina. He knew what made her tick. She got excited when he exposed her, and she moaned and squirmed. He stopped kissing her, dropped his pants, and thrust his cock inside her wet pussy. The office was lit by

the noon sun. Her ass was on fire. She threw her head back as she came.

Shinpei snapped out of his fantasy. When he checked his watch, he realized that only three minutes had passed, although it felt like ten. His cock was hard again.

He couldn't take it anymore. He tried the knob. It was locked.

What should he do, wait here until they were done? No way. He banged on the door. Here they were, sneaking around in the office during the day, with the door locked. They were so busted. Even if she slipped out the back door, he had seen her sneaking in. No flimsy excuse was going to get her out of this.

Three more bangs. As he lifted his fist for another strike, the door soundlessly opened.

A young man stuck out his face. "Hello? Sorry, lunchtime," he said.

"I saw a woman go in there. She's my wife. Bring her out now."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. We don't have a visitor at the moment," the man replied.

Shinpei was about to lay into him when he was surprised to see several other people milling around behind the young man.

Naoko and her lover were not alone in there? Then why lock the door from the inside?

Shinpei strode in, pushing the young man away as he tried to stop him. On the right was an office, and to the left was a guest room. A partition separated the rooms.

"Naoko! Come out."

"Please keep it down," the man said.

Suddenly Shinpei's arms were twisted around behind his back. He was being escorted outside.

"What are you doing? Cut it out. Don't you dare treat me like some kind of a thug. I'm not walking away with nothing. I want my wife back."

He was about to be shoved out the door when the grip on his arms lessened.

"Let him in. Don't make a scene." The speaker's voice was smooth and deep and had an immediate soothing effect on Shinpei. He pushed the young man aside and turned to where the voice had come from.

A sleek figure of a man bowed gracefully. He appeared to be about twenty-five and was impeccably dressed in a dark gray suit. He looked smart and genteel. Everyone else disappeared.

"Excuse the rudeness. My name is Taki."

"Kuo Shinpei. I'm an entrepreneur." Shinpei straightened out his windbreaker, aware of the edge that had entered his voice. "I saw my wife walk in here. What were you doing with the door locked during the lunch hour?"

"We should have visited you first. But moving all those tools would have been quite a hassle. This way, please."

The man who called himself Taki pointed toward a door at the back as he made his way toward it. He opened the door and gestured Shinpei to go in.

6

SHINPEI WENT through the door, which said DIRECTOR in big white letters. He stepped into an office that was anything but normal.

He had seen the size of the bookstore downstairs, and there was no way this office could fit in the space. It was like a vast hall in some mansion, or even a castle. The room was full of wacky machines. What shocked him most was not the shiny, state-of-the-art apparatus, or the ancient-looking civic engineering equipment, or the fact that Naoko was lying naked on what appeared to be an examination table. His eyes were glued on the young man standing by the table.

No, it was a she.

The woman was smartly clothed in a black three-piece suit. Her profile held a hint of masculinity. She was without a doubt the most beautiful creature Shinpei had ever seen. No, not even close. It was a beauty bordering on impossibility.

Waves of desire coursed through Shinpei. God, he wanted her, right this minute.

The woman turned to face him, and he found himself getting hard for the third time that morning.

"Excuse me?" Her voice rang out like a bell.

"It's her husband. He followed her," Taki explained.

"There must have been displays of odd behavior." A look of relief swept over her face.

"Looks like it. We shouldn't let down our guard. It's not completely awakened," Taki said.

"Only a matter of time," the woman replied, her tone quick and snappy, like a whip, and yet it was still the same bell-like voice. "So what do we do? Should we show it to him?"

"That'll explain everything, I suppose. We can help him get over the shock later," Taki said.

"Hold on a sec," Shinpei cut in. "What are you talking about? What is going on here? You've got some explaining to do." All the equipment and the eerie atmosphere had spooked him, but he was not a man who could be easily intimidated.

Taki nodded. "Okay. I'll get to the point. Right now, your wife is in critical condition. We were very lucky that we found her before it was too late."

The anger Shinpei felt toward Naoko lessened and turned to concern. Taki was scaring him.

"I don't understand . . . I thought my wife was cheating on me, so I followed her here . . . Who are you?"

"We'll talk about that later. Your wife's condition is far more important. As for your doubts about her infidelity, please rest assured. She has been completely faithful to you."

The woman cocked her head warily and pointed in the direction of the weirdest tool among those surrounding the examination table.

Not a sound. Nothing moved. Nothing except for Naoko. And the way she moved made Shinpei mad and ashamed of her nudity for the first time in their marriage.

One of her legs was raised, and her hands, which had been lying on the table, traveled down to her buttocks and up along her body, kneading their way up, not caressing. It was like watching a stripper. She seemed to be doing it willingly.

What the—. Shinpei stopped himself when he realized Naoko was asleep. *What is happening? Is she under some kind of hypnosis?*

Naoko's hands reached her breasts and gently massaged them, the nipples jumping to attention. Her fleshy hips and voluminous buttocks gyrated seductively. The look on her face was sheer lust.

Shinpei had never seen his wife like this. It was a sight to behold. There was not a man in existence who would not drool over a woman making such a display of herself. Her moves were so erotic they would make a stripper blush. Naoko being just an ordinary housewife made the whole situation even hotter, lighting a brand-new flame inside Shinpei.

Naoko's body was flushed in a shade of pink. She was getting close to climax not even touching her pussy.

There was a sound of someone swallowing hard, and then it happened. Something—was it a liquid? smoke?—of an indescribable color dribbled out from under the dark mound of Naoko's pubic hair. It floated across the table and into the air, expanding and contracting, changing

shape. In the thing that came from Naoko's vagina, Shinpei saw an image of Naoko, like a ghostly reproduction of what was on the table, moaning and writhing in ecstasy, as a gigantic man with a strong resemblance to Apollo rode her hard.

"That's a dream your wife's having," Taki explained, noting the stunned face of the husband. "As you can see, it's lewd and erotic. That's why it came out of her uterus. Your wife is not to be blamed."

"What?!" Shinpei stared at him incredulously.

Taki pointed toward a space diagram at least ten meters in length. The image on the screen was Naoko's lips, in living color and reproduced down to every line. But on the screen a big, veined cock thrust in and out of her mouth, which opened to take it in.

"Look closer. See how the man transforms himself as he rapes your wife in the dream," Taki said, his tone that of a scientist examining a specimen.

His cock still assaulting Naoko's mouth, the giant's face went through a hideous change. His lips extended until they reached his ears, splitting his face into a hideous half-moon. Mighty, moth-eaten fangs appeared from the gaping mouth. His body bent out of any recognizable shape; skin drooped and undulated like lava, spattering Naoko with thin droplets of liquid that looked like insects.

But the change was most marked in the rough fingers of the rapist. Claws grew from his fingertips, each covered in sticky goo. With every scratch, her most sacred place became more thickly covered in slime. Naoko screamed,

shattering the quiet, as the villain's laughter erupted. On the screen the observers saw the monster laughing, but there was no sound in the examination room.

"I-it's just a dream she's having, right?" Shinpei asked, worried.

"It's not her choice," Taki said, his tone still cold. "Something is making her. It's a grudge. The grudge of an incubus."

When Shinpei realized that what was happening on the screen depicted what was happening to his wife — that she wasn't just having a dirty dream, but being raped—he understood that it was not only humans that walked on the face of the earth. He was stunned. "I-I just can't seem to get my mind wrapped around it. What's happening?"

"Don't worry. There is nothing wrong with you," Taki told him gently. "We're going to kill it. Your wife won't remember a thing when this is over. Makie, get on with it."

"You got it," said Makie. Her throaty, dreamy voice entranced Shinpei again, momentarily distracting him from the fact that his wife was being raped in front of him.

For the first time since he had stepped into the room, the monstrous machines whirled to life. Steel cylinders and wooden pistons moved up and down, cracking the surface of a huge glass vessel in a spiderweb pattern.

The machine clearly affected the demon that was playing with Naoko. He stopped raping her and covered his head. He lifted his face, writing in agony, and in his eyes was a look of sheer madness. The demon stood, rigid,

and a wave of thunder from the machine hit his enormous hips. If the target was part of a dream, then so was the shining arrow that erupted from the machine. In a flash of silver light, the lines that framed the demon's body became clear. In the next second, everything was absorbed by the light, including Naoko.

"Naoko's gone, too. Was that a dream? What's happened to her?" Shinpei was confused.

"Uteri don't produce normal dreams. That dream you just saw—it does not belong in this world. Your wife is having a peaceful dream right now," Taki explained. "She seems to have responded well to the treatment."

True to his words, Naoko had reappeared, sleeping soundly on the examination table.

"Wh-what do you mean by 'treatment'? What's an incubus?" Shinpei asked, his knees trembling. This was too much for him to handle.

Taki explained, "Your wife was possessed by a nightmare. A spirit, to be precise, called an incubus. It rapes humans in dreams. This is our fault, too. We were completely unprepared for his awakening and let our security network fray, allowing him and others like him to get onto this side and feed on your wife's dream and others'. Incubi thrive on human energies. Anyone raped by them will eventually die, drained. Not physically die, but become mentally crippled, a vegetable, for the rest of their lives."

Taki was quiet for a moment. Shinpei shook his head. "Okay. So what you're saying is that freak, that . . . demon, possessed my wife's dream and raped her in it. I

get it. I thank you for rescuing her. Is the monster dead?" Shinpei asked carefully.

Taki and Makie turned to him, and Shinpei realized by the look on their faces that he had just touched on a very sensitive topic.

"So, can I take her back home?" he asked.

Taki nodded. "Yes. Just one other thing. Your wife has been interrupted in the middle of one of the wildest, most erotic dreams she has ever had. It's a big disappointment, and quite a big blow to your wife. The wilder the dream, the more radical the treatment. She might be out of it for a few months. Your commitment is the key to her quick recovery."

"I got it. Can we go?" Shinpei repeated.

"If you can promise that what happened today never leaves this room."

"No one would believe me if I told," Shinpei said.

"True enough." Taki smiled.

Shinpei managed to return the smile, though he didn't feel like it. "Okay, then."

Before any of them could say another word, a shriek cut the quiet air.

7

MAKIE AND Taki spun toward Naoko, wearing identical stunned expressions.

The liquid-like stuff that had come from Naoko's vagina floated in the air.

"Turn off the machine," Taki ordered. "It's started over from zero."

"It's been switched off already," Makie replied calmly.

"He's trying to come back. Damn, we didn't see that coming. This one is not going quietly. Double the output efficiency of the machine. Desperate times call for desperate measures."

Makie nodded. She remained silent, although she appeared to have something to say. She walked toward the machines. She seemed to know her way around them. She pushed buttons, and all the weird-looking devices lined up in the vast space at the back of the building in Shibuya that couldn't possibly hold them started whirring again.

Following Taki's orders, Makie doubled the output energy and began to patch through to Naoko's dream. The process altered the quality of the dream and turned it into an uninhabitable space for the beast. Not even the smallest demon germ could get inside.

The machine had been a popular method of destroying incubi since ancient times. It was offered to humans

by the other side in return for their accepting two hundred immigrants in 2708, when the Megiddo Treaty was ratified.

The substance that Makie had destroyed just moments ago had risen from death. It started to twitch. It writhed and reformed until one end became a sharp blade. It flew toward Naoko, who was still naked and asleep, and pointed itself at her groin.

"N-no!"

As if startled by Shinpei's scream, the blob came to a halt in midair. Inside, it flashed, and then it started to change again—a chemical change of some sort. The silky, cloth-like creature turned upside down, twitched, bent out of shape, transformed into something awful.

It appeared to be alive. It had four legs, but the color and shape—nothing about it made sense. It was totally divorced from natural laws of the universe. Its structure was ridiculous. The weirdest part was that what appeared to be its arms changed shape by the second. One minute they were linked spheres and the next detached crystals, but always recognizable as arms.

Shinpei suddenly felt an unidentifiable sensation piercing his body. The feeling was put into words by Taki.

"No! He's realizing!"

Visually, nothing happened. But Shinpei could tell that the illusion of the demon, as it writhed and changed form, was gaining substance.

"Triple the output. Chase him into Hazama."

"We haven't got time. It's turning real. Seventy-seven

percent," Makie said, although she was nowhere near any of the machines.

"Nullify the rest. I'll take care of whatever it is that we're up against."

"I'll help you," Makie said.

But before the words were out of her mouth, the demon leaped from the table and landed on the floor. The mouth, which hadn't settled on one shape, spat out disgusting liquid, and its eyes, neither sphere or square, surveyed the room. As they zeroed in on the naked housewife lying on the table, Taki jumped into the air. Leaping three meters up as easily as if he had taken a single step, he landed on the examination table and gave the demon a sharp kick.

Pow! His foot made contact with the incubus, and his toe disappeared inside the demon. With what sounded like a groan, it turned toward the door. An elegant shadowy figure moved after it.

"That's against the rules," Makie said. "Go away. Don't embarrass us any more than you have already."

The incubus extended tentacles toward the door, but they bent at the touch of Makie's fingertips. Its head caved in beneath her hand. With a groan, she stopped on the spot. She swung her other arm in the air for another blow. The incubus vanished, and her fingers sliced thin air.

Taki ran toward her. "What happened?"

"I'm all right. The energy wave was so powerful," she said.

"I felt it, too," Taki said, his fingers pressed into his temples. "The demon got on the wave and ran away."

"More like he was drawn to it," Makie replied. "Anyway, we should do something. What if one of the victims gets pregnant and delivers a dream child?"

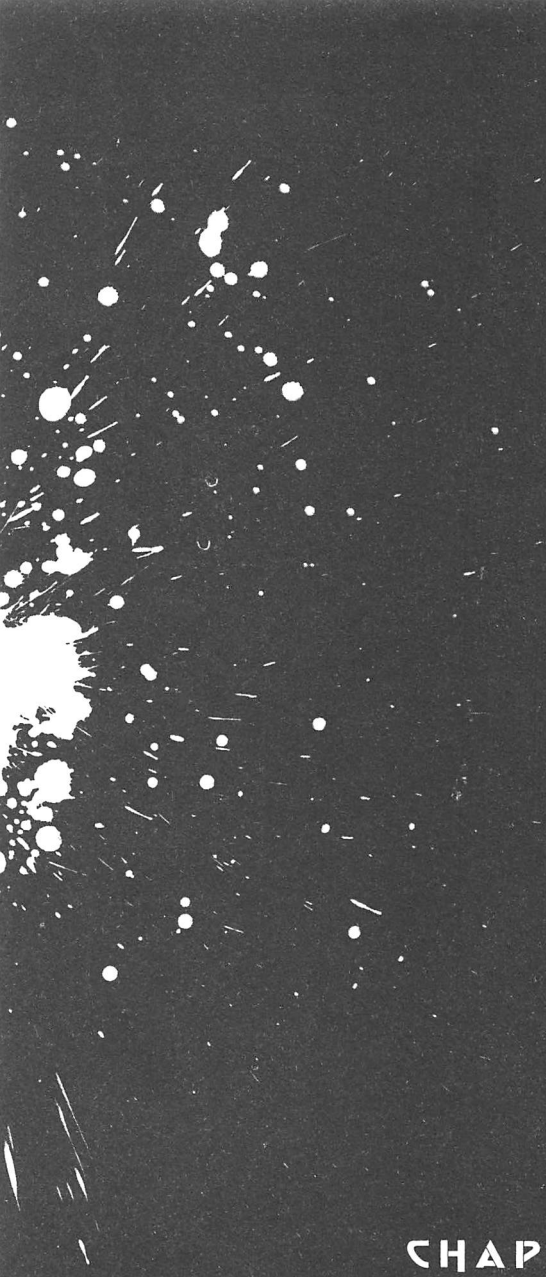
"Can you get to the source of the wave?"

"Roughly, but yes. It came from around the Senzokuike Ward."

"Let's go."

Taki turned to Shinpei. "Take good care, sir. I'll have a guard send you home. One last thing—your wife was here because we needed to examine her as a part of our investigation. Rest assured, it is over. You won't be seeing us again. Good-bye."

As Taki and Makie made a quick exit, Shinpei realized that his wife's case was far more serious than he had thought, and that he would not be running the show.



DRUNK GUARD

CHAPTER TWO

1

SAGA WAS being held at the Denenchofu precinct. In his head, the swirl of misty alcohol crashed against the waves of thought. He had grown used to it. But the throbbing pain in his face and jaw was killing him.

Last night, he had answered every question the detective asked.

"That guy? The one you beat up? His face looks like hamburger. I know you were drunk, but you've got to know how much a man can take," the detective had told him. "You were out of control, man."

Yes, Saga had yelled at the neighbor woman. He remembered that. But did she have to send her yakuza husband over to his place to get back at him? The guy was a total wuss.

Saga kept his mouth shut, didn't try to argue. He was actually relieved to hear he would be spending the night in jail, if no one bailed him out. He hadn't had a bath or shower for six straight days. The smell of alcohol erupted from his pores. He was disgusting. Suddenly goose bumps raced across his back. He remembered his dream, the sound of the laughter that woke him up. The terror he had felt then returned, holding him in an icy grip. The feeling of his skin crawling was too much to bear. He needed a bath, if nothing else to wash away the fear. He had a disquieting feeling that something was coming.

And it was getting close.

Someone stood in front of the door to his cell. It was the interrogating officer.

"Hey, how's it going? Feeling all right?"

Saga saw the uneasiness in the officer's eyes and felt the color drain from his face.

"Get up. You can go," the officer said.

"What, already?"

The officer picked up the curiously nervous tone in Saga's voice. "That's right, you can go. There are more drunkards out there who belong in here. Make space for them."

"Is there any way I can stay?"

"Punch me in the face. That'll do," the officer said.

When Saga did not respond, the officer unlocked and opened the iron door and stood aside.

The drunkard came out without protest. He was still wobbly on his feet.

What makes them drink this hard? The officer had the same thought every time he saw an alcohol addict in a cell.

Saga bowed to him. The officer looked down to return the bow, and *pow!* Saga hit him in the jaw. The officer was dumbstruck. Saga came at him, head first, and the officer gave a groan of pain as Saga's head hit him in the chest.

Saga clasped his hands together and swung at the officer's neck. It wasn't a hard blow, but enough to knock him off his feet. Saga was going easy on the officer, and he knew what he was doing. So he was totally prepared when his feet were swept out from under him. He covered his head, but the officer's blow hit his right cheek.

A wave of relief washed over him. *Now get me back in the cell*, he thought.

"You ungrateful little prick," the officer spat. A powerful blow hit Saga's hands, which were protecting his stomach, as he heard the officer's voice from above. More punches. One missed. One caught him in his side. A groan escaped his lips.

"Son of a—" The officer yanked Saga to his feet by his collar and pushed him back inside. Obviously, plan B had worked. But a funny feeling rose up inside him as the officer clutched the iron bar with his right hand.

The iron bar was all soft and gooey. The officer did a

quick examination of it. It looked normal. He grabbed the bar, this time pulling it forward. It moved in his hand like rubber. He screamed and let go, wheeling back and crashing to the wall. After a quick twitch, his body stopped moving.

Saga watched in horror. This was it. The danger was imminent. The bar changing form was a sign that *it* was coming.

Without warning, it showed up in the cell.

Chuckling.

Saga shot out of the cell. He scooped up the officer in one arm and made for the door. A multicolored light sped past him with a whoosh, grazing his face as he dodged it, and shot into the iron door.

Unfazed, Saga pushed the door. It was a wall. Stunned, he turned around, and there was the door, to his right. He ripped it open and ran.

Arrow-like tentacles sank into the wooden floor behind him and gave chase.

Saga saw a bulb protruding from the floor. Suddenly he was running on the ceiling. With a thud, the two men fell.

Perhaps *that thing* could turn things into something different by shoving itself into them? Saga wondered. It was like a bad dream coming alive. Yes, that was what it was—a nightmare. He was still asleep, back in his apartment.

Saga closed his eyes. With his right hand he pinched his upper left arm. Hard.

A pain shot into his head, and something close by shook.

His flesh tore off. He realized that he was now outside the monster's territory of dreams. This was something else altogether.

Saga saw it clearly for the first time, and a horrible wave of nausea ran though his body.

Its arrow-like tentacles snaked their way toward him. It kept changing forms, never settling on one. It shifted from a rock to a piece of thin paper. Shape-shifting was one of their signatures.

Saga leaned over the unconscious officer and searched for the gun. Dream or not, or whatever this was, as long as he recognized it as real, it had to follow the laws of physics of this world. The supernatural experience he just had was because they had crossed over the boundaries. Now the tables were turned.

Someone knocked on the door—the door Saga had found the second time. He aimed at the ball of terror coming toward him and pulled the trigger on the small revolver. His New Nambu .38 caliber slug erupted with a blast that surprised him.

The weird creature convulsed, sending fragments flying all over. But it did not stop.

Saga pulled up his arms in front of his chest as the assailant with no permanent shape leaped over him.

And then two hands appeared out of nowhere. They moved in from either side of the monster and touched its

surface. The monster crumbled under the touch of the fingertips, and the creature slumped onto the floor.

A slightly sorrowful voice came from above his head. "Close call, buddy."

No reply from Saga. Instead, he patted the back of the officer who lay unconscious. "Do something about him, please," he said, never bothering to look at his lifesaver.

The body of the officer was lifted off the floor. "He might be off for a little while. A quick therapy session will get him back on his feet," a different voice said.

For the first time, Saga lifted his grimy face, which was barely visible in the tangle of his beard. He heard a cold voice that resonated like a bell chime.

"Hello." Makie gave him an elegant bow with a gentle smile.

Suddenly Saga's face was full of emotions. He turned away, agitated and nonplussed.

"She's from the other end, right, Taki?"

"The best of the best," Taki said.

"That was a beast. It eats away at humans' minds," Saga said.

Taki straightened his tie and collar. "So . . . I was right."

"'Bye." Saga got up slowly and shuffled toward the cell door without a glance at the officer on the floor.

"Where are you headed?" Taki called after him. "The exit is over here."

"I assaulted an officer."

"He won't remember any of it."

"I threatened him."

"Stop fooling around. You know what happened here. You should know what needs to be done and by whom. I was looking for you. You saved me a trip. We need to talk."

Saga went back into the cell without a word and closed the door behind him.

Gesturing toward the door, Taki said, "The guard is asleep. The Administration Division will bring the commissioner up to speed. No more trouble."

"Good-bye."

"Which do you prefer? Jail or liquor?" Makie said. She slung the officer—who was nearly six foot two and well built—easily over her shoulder. "If we call someone here right now, they won't be getting you off the hook easily. The quickest way to a bar is that we take care of this mess ourselves. Will that help?"

Saga blushed; his eyes bulged, looking as if he were about to shoot fire. In the next second, the look was gone. He was just a grubby little drunkard sitting behind the bars. "Look, Taki. You're not going to make me do it, are you? Huh?"

Taki remained unflappable, standing in front of the pleading man. "It's up to you."

"What am I supposed to do? There's nothing I can do. You know that, don't you?"

There was no reply.

"Okay, fine." Saga gave a cell bar a slap. "I'll hear you out. Listen, I'm just killing time. And I want a reward," he said.

"Deal. But the price is set. It'll get you a few bottles," Taki said.

"Good enough for me. Ten days' worth of booze." Saga's voice was sticky, and he licked his lips.

Taki nodded and took out what appeared to be a whisky bottle made of metal and flipped open its lid with his thumb.

Then he got close to the hideous creature and spilled a few drops onto it. The liquid, which was the color of grapes, fell onto the slab of flesh, creating a stain that quickly spread until it covered its entire body, or what was left of it.

Within a few seconds, the remains melted, bubbling into a puddle.

"Wow, this time it worked," Makie muttered with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

The liquid was a potion prepared by the Black Guard Tech Lab—Eraser Division. In ancient times, the dumping of demons' bodies was the most delicate procedure the Black Guard had to perform, mostly because they had to keep the existence of demons hidden from ordinary citizens.

Although the inexplicable used to be a natural part of people's lives during the Middle Ages, modernization turned it into something to be laughed at. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, rationalism emerged and science advanced. So the Black Guard had to invent a potion that enabled them to discreetly get rid of bodies that

violated the physical laws of the human world. It was a top priority.

When a demon dies in the human world, the corpse will disappear naturally, after its energy runs out. There are some exceptions. Thirty to forty percent of them could be cleared away using regular scientific methods. The Black Guard had to do their best to make sure that everything that happened in the underworld stayed there. It was their mission.

When the Black Guard was established, it was divided into seventeen divisions. The most important assignment for the Tech Lab was to invent an acid-like substance that solved the problem of demon remains. Even with help from a team of scientists from the other side, it was a struggle. The potion had gone through many incarnations, and finally they came up with one that was powerful enough to dissolve ninety percent of bodies to liquid within 7.4 seconds.

The potion Taki had used that night proved most effective.

Makie left the unconscious officer in the break room next to the cells and made her way into the police station. She sent Taki and Saga away from the building and walked toward an officer who sat behind a wooden desk. She flicked her pinky, adorned by a gold ring, in front of his face. A faint aromatic odor floated up.

". . . the street," the officer said slowly, finishing his sentence. He avoided eye contact, flushed down to his

neck, and leaned over the desk, pointing to the street in front of the building. "You turn right at the intersection down the road and walk four blocks and turn left. And walk fifty feet from there."

"Thanks very much."

With a bow, the ravishing lady walked off. The officer sat back and stared at her as she left. He glanced at his watch, which he had set that morning, and wondered why it had jumped ten minutes during his seamless conversation with her. He also wondered why it was taking his partner so long to get the drunk out of the cell in the back.

2

TAKI MADE a call to the Administration Division, explained what happened at the police precinct that night, and asked them to clean up the mess. Then the three of them headed for Saga's apartment.

"This room has a soothing effect on me," said its occupant. His words were slurred, typical of an alcoholic. The apartment building was a five-minute walk from Senzokuike. It was dilapidated and miserable.

The steps creaked as they climbed to Saga's room. In front of a door with a plate with the number 4 on it, Saga turned and looked at Makie with a crooked mouth.

"I don't own the building, but I pay the rent. Monsters aren't welcome."

"Hey," Taki said angrily, raising a hand to strike Saga for the insult.

Makie gently restrained him. "It's okay. I'll be downstairs."

The two men watched her go and went inside. The horrific smell of alcohol and of something rotten assaulted them the second they stepped in. It was sickening. The smell must have seeped into the tatami flooring and the scratchy poles. No one could possibly call this reeking pile home.

Saga kicked aside piles of magazines and crumpled tissues, creating a space for one person, and sat in the middle of the worn, flat futon, gesturing Taki to do the same.

Scanning the books littering the room, Taki said, "This dump is where the Dream Guard lives?"

"Yeah, so? My kind of life." Saga took a swig from the bottle he had bought with the money for "hearing Taki out." He gave a heavy sigh. "Been like this for ten years. Can't change the way I am," Saga said.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"No. Just watch out for the alcohol," Saga warned.

Taki took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth.

Saga gave a humorless chuckle. "You haven't changed. You've been smoking the same thing for fourteen years. The money's poor, huh?"

Taki put his hand on his forehead. "Six months ago, someone broke in, destroyed the safety stones, and stole

the pot. You're our only hope. We want you to find out who's behind this and destroy the beast."

Saga scoffed and stirred the warm air with a paper fan. He took another swig of liquor and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "They can't *be* destroyed. That's why we put them under seal and had three new guards watching the stone every three days. We couldn't do it five thousand years ago, we can't do it now."

"The perp planned this very carefully. The rumor's been flying around for seventy or eighty years, but nothing about who or when. We're stuck," Taki said.

"Whoever sealed it . . ." Saga trailed off and shook his head. "No. It doesn't matter."

"We had them sealed under the killing stones from Nasu. There's also a crypt just below them, and three guards posted around the clock. I believe you were the one who discovered that the stone and those two beasts were incompatible. You got that right. A series of weird accidents occurred when we split them up. Guards losing their marbles and what not. Strange things kept happening. And it all stopped when we placed them in one room. No more accidents. Well, that is, except for the cracking walls and the sudden freeze-up of the room and an earthquake. The room needed repairing every three days. It doesn't work if two monsters are equal. One must be stronger than the other. That was your idea. Your method has been adopted by every Black Guard unit all over the world. The only complainer was the Louvre Mu-

seum. You cost them three million francs in their annual expenses to keep up repairs on the underground crypt."

"Old story," Saga said. He drank the whisky and fell facedown onto the futon, causing the room to creak and dust to fly around his head.

"Okay, let me tell you a new one," Taki said, drawing on the cigarette without a frown. "There have been freaky accidents all over Tokyo during the past two weeks. People are refusing to have sex with their partners. Sometimes it's one of them, sometimes both. It starts small but turns very violent after a week. Those affected cry and thrash around as if possessed. That should give you a good idea of what's been happening. Ever since the pot disappeared, we've been keeping our eyes peeled for any sign of the incubus. There's not much chance of finding them after day one. They can assimilate into dreams, making it impossible for us to locate them. We used to have an excellent Black Guard who could manage it, but there was an accident and he's in rehab. So we tried rounding up housewives who'd been touched during the past three days and made them go through a treatment in Shibuya. And out he came from one of the victims."

Taki, a Black Guard who worked hard to maintain peace between the human world and the demonic, observed his former colleague. Saga Miyuki looked much the worse for wear. Taki wondered how the exceptional man before him had ended up like a miserable failure in a dirt-cheap apartment, drinking away his problems.

"Here's what's happening," Taki continued. "At least, what we *think* is happening. People possessed by the demons become averse to the idea of having sex with anyone, not just a specific someone. It's confined to one corner of Tokyo right now, but it's spreading as we speak. Soon, everyone in the Kanto district will be impotent. It'll go nationwide, and on to Eurasia, South America, North America. It'll sweep through the entire world."

Saga gave an incredulous look. "And that's the big emergency? People won't get it on?"

Taki shook his head. "You don't get it. If it gets that bad, there will be no new generation of humans. The world will steadily depopulate and the human race will become extinct, leaving no one to inherit what we've built for ourselves. When the last human dies, that's the end of everything. In a hundred years, at the latest in a hundred thousand years, that day will come."

Saga kept chugging and gave an indifferent shrug. A shaft of red sunlight sliced in from the window and cast shadows on the tatami. The shadows on the floor looked like nothing but two friends talking about love and hope in a room aglow.

"Saga Miyuki, the legendary guard," Taki stated matter-of-factly. "You are the very best of the best. We need you. I will use force if I have to."

Saga remained expressionless. There was a long pause. Their shadows seemed to change lengths.

There was a knock at the door. A hesitant and faint knock.

"Come in," Taki said.

The door opened, revealing a long-haired girl, about twenty years old, wearing a yellow sweatsuit. She had big confused eyes and held a metallic delivery box in her right hand.

"I'm sorry I invited myself in . . . Is this a bad time?"

"Hardly," Saga said, slurring. "He was just leaving with that pretty monst—lady. Are you delivering, Hana?"

"Yes. You look drunk again, Mr. Saga," the girl said, looking down. Her face suddenly hardened. "You should cut down a little. This is for you. Take them all."

Her white hand put a small bottle on the floor. She looked up, bowed at Taki, and took off like a wind.

Taki stared at Saga before his gaze moved to the bottle on the floor. It contained many kinds of pills; some for colds, some for digestive disorder, some for liver, . . .

Three pills of each kind, Taki noted. The girl had gathered everything she could find in her house. That meant she had taken the trouble of counting each pill and putting them in the bottle.

"I guess I'm asking too much," Taki said as he stood. "Forget all I said tonight. I'll get out of your hair." He went out the door quietly.

Makie waited for him in front of the building. Although her clothes were black, the sun tinged them with red, as if she were splashed with blood. Together they continued down the rambling path that led to the main street.

"How was it?" Makie asked.

Taki shook his head.

"My fault?"

"He has a family," Taki said.

Makie turned to him. "You're kind." Her voice was cold as always, but it now seemed different somehow.

"Mm" was all he said in reply.

"Was he one of your colleagues?"

"We worked together when I was a rookie. Saga was my partner for seven years. We almost got killed more times than I can count."

"Ancient story," Makie said.

"That's right."

"This isn't a job for the romantic at heart."

"Couldn't agree more. I'm the exception."

The two of them fell silent. On the main road, they hailed a taxi to take them to Shibuya. The sun set and the moon rose. It was almost round and eerily red, as if signaling something horrible to come.

Near the Arisugawa-no-miya memorial park in Azabu, several people stood around in the courtyard of a huge building—a man in dark gray suit, a handsome woman in a black three-piece, an old man whose white beard was so long it almost reached the ground, and a gentleman dressed in white, with round Coke-bottle glasses. Some sturdy-looking men stood nearby, guarding them. All of them felt the caress of the cool fall wind on their skin. The summer heat was long gone. Behind them, a white hospital loomed in the brooding darkness.

Hundreds of years ago, long before the Azabu district

appeared on the map, the Hospital was established. It had supplied care for Black Guards for thousands of years. Its history remained a mystery. It might be five thousand years or five hundred thousand years old—or it could have been both or neither. It had served as a healing place for wounded guards who had fought the wicked power of the demonic and as a research center, studying how to efficiently use and enhance Psychic Power, the strongest weapon of the Black Guard.

A total of 257 branches of the Hospital existed all over the world. Word had it that each one had in its basement a black treasure chest, prohibited from being taken outside. Nobody had ever seen it, but night guards had heard weird groans and the clanking sounds of metal coming from somewhere beneath the building as they stood guard in the subterranean dungeon.

Tonight, the people gathered in the yard knew it was not an urban legend. They all stood around, leaving some distance between them. Their eyes, with a hint of sadness in them, all rested on the same rectangular wooden box, which had been placed on the dark ground. The box was one meter long, fifty centimeters across and seventy high. Despite the eldritch ambience that surrounded it, it was unadorned, with no creepy engravings or crest, just wormholes across the surface.

Some of the men, led by the elderly man with the white beard, had carried the box from a truck parked nearby in the lot. Since then, everyone had stared at it without moving a muscle. Only a few minutes had passed, but it could

have been forever. The old man with the beard broke the eerie silence with a heavy sigh.

"I never thought I would see the day when I open it. Not in the human world, at least."

"I share your surprise, sir. This is the first time in a hundred years. Never thought I'd see it again. Well, what do they know?" The gruff voice came from a thickset bald man wearing a blue trench coat. If the old man with the white beard was thin as a crane, the bald man was a giant. The old man might have looked a hundred years old, but the athletic man could not have been more than fifty. Although some might have called his looks teddy-bear adorable, his eyes were sharp as a hawk's, hot and full of energy. The man was vigorously fierce. His name was Domon Sanma, and he was the chief of the Black Guard of Japan.

The bearded old man's tone was casual, despite the serious nature of what they were discussing. "Okay, I had it brought out here as requested. Now I will ask you again. Are you really sure you want to open it?"

Anyone who looked closely would be surprised by how faint a shadow he cast, even on the brightest summer day. The old man was Choshi Hijiri, the captain of the Black Guard in the demonic world.

He went on. "The box has three layers. The beast is sealed in the fourth layer—the impossible space. The problem is its evil has been eating at the first layer. If it reaches the surface and punches a hole, however tiny it is, hell breaks free."

Choshi Hijiri whirled around to face everyone, shouting at them with a tad too much enthusiasm. "In preparation for it, we have gathered a group of experienced warriors. The best of the best. Still, we're going to need all the help we can get. According to our research, there is only one guard that stands any chance with the beast. Someone called Saga something. Is he here tonight?"

"He quit," Domon said, his voice hard as iron. "Instead, we've found someone equally capable. You can leave the rest to the Security Division of the hospital."

His piercing eyes turned and glared at Renzaburo Taki, who stood waiting quietly. Domon continued. "One of the incubi was taken. The other one is sealed in the box here. As for their powers, well, I have no idea . . . Director, are you ready?"

The Hospital director's eyes fluttered behind his thick round glasses. He spoke with a booming voice.

"Just for tonight, we have enhanced the barrier that covers the three square meters of the crypt and have amplified its power by ten to the fifth. The best wizards all over the world are trying their best to build up the barrier. The spirit-power generator set up in the basement of the Ren Plateau is set, too. Thirty percent of the power that the generator normally needs to control magma flux has been diverted to the barrier. No one, not a thing, is getting out of the yard."

"That should do." Domon nodded, trying not to show his admiration for his apprentice's thoroughness by tightening his lips. "This job takes the most unflappable of

men. Taki and those three over there, you're up." He turned to the director. "What have you done, exactly, to protect these gentlemen?"

"Before we came here, we all had a shot of activator that quintuples Psy Power for two hours. And"—the director looked up, his glasses reflecting the skies full of stars—"at two o'clock in the morning, Japan time, NASA's space shuttle was launched and is now flying thirty-six thousand kilometers above the Hospital, in time with the rotational speed of the earth. It is hovering over us as we speak. Colin Mosburg, an American Black Guard who has mastered a way to control the power of the universe for the first time in the history of the world, and the astounding Ohara are on it. They're ready to tune in with our Psychic Power. Our barriers are unbreakable."

"That's reassuring." In opposition to the director's oppressive tones, Domon spoke in a large, brisk voice, which made others straighten their backs. "Okay, let's do it."

The director gave a nod. Taki and the other three came forward until they stood one meter from the box.

Taki felt cold, but his head was clear. *Colin and the astounding Ohara have got us in sight*, he reminded himself. The astounding Ohara was one of the greatest Black Guards ever, a fortune-teller who had been never wrong. He had established a family of his own at seven and had joined the team of the Black Guard at eight. At the time, he was ranked with the likes of Dal Carli from Tibet and Ferreira K from Lisbon. He was so great, he could easily destroy a demon in the Southern Hemisphere with his

Psy Power from the Northern Hemisphere. If he used his Psychic Power on a physical level, he could lift half the North American continent in the air. Or so Taki had heard.

A warm sensation rose up in Taki that told him his partner had arrived. He glanced at Makie, standing next to him, poised and perfect as ever, and wondered where she had been two hours before they came here. It struck him as odd, considering how she used to follow him everywhere he went until she was told not to.

She had made it on time, no questions asked. But Taki's doubts had not gone away. His mind came back to the same question he had been asking himself over and over again. Those incubi. Just the thought of them had forced the Black Guard to set up the worldwide defense network.

How bad were they?

3

PEOPLE HAVE dreams. The dream is a domain that remains unsolved by modern physics. All the Black Guard knows that dreams exist on their own, in their own dimension. It is a scientific fact extracted through communication with the demonic world. It is not the dreamer's spiritual journey or anything born out of reality. The

dream is a world in itself. It is very real and never stays still.

Even Black Guards have no idea about the mechanics of dreaming. They know as much about it as an elementary school student tackling relativity theory. Since ancient times, there have been a handful of guards with the ability to experience a dream as an actual entity. They understand that people live double lives, that bodies are merely vessels that trap their souls and keep them grounded in reality on the conscious level. Ordinary people do not regard the dream as an earthly experience.

As the old legend goes, when you die in a dream, you are dead in reality. In short, people cannot die in the dream as long as they live in the real world.

There are some unfortunate exceptions—death in sleep for one. Just as there are animals in reality, there are savage beasts in the dream world—incubi beasts. They rape people while they dream, inside the dream. They will eventually develop control over you in the real world.

In what shape do they come? How do they rape?

The thing about these beasts is that everything about them is clear and yet nothing is absolute. No matter how many witnesses or survivors come forward, no one can capture an exact picture of what they are. In the realm of dreams, everything, including the dreamer, keeps shifting shapes. The same goes for the beasts. They are one but different. They are feared not only by humans but in the demonic world. Residents of the other world have

dreams, too, making them quite delectable to the dream tormentors.

The tricky part is that those who are raped remain slaves to the incubus even in reality. They just take whatever their rapists dish out. They resist the advances of their real-life partners and refuse to participate in any sexual activities outside their dreams.

If this pattern were to continue, it could lead to the extinction of the human race, and those possessed could turn into bloodthirsty killers who busted their loved ones' heads without blinking an eye if ordered to do so.

Long ago, around the time when the human world and the demonic one had started to interact, some wise old men had seen the danger. With mysterious superpower and trickery, they performed the miracle of imprisoning the beasts in the wooden box and stone pot. More surprisingly, the two captured incubi turned out to be the only ones in existence.

But then again, it only took one beast to wreak havoc in all dreams. They were capable of showing up in any dream, in all dreams.

Centuries had passed since the beasts were incarcerated. The horrific story of the beasts had lost its significance, been reduced to the story of a single incubus, the great wise men to a mere myth. The only thing left was the beasts' vibrations detector.

Now the nightmare was back. A group of terrorists had broken into the crypt, killed the wardens, and stolen

the stone pot, disappearing into the night. The Black Guard had put all their resources into the search. Their major concern was the beast's capability, its real power, rather than the casualties it could cause. If there was a war down the road, which was very likely to happen, they had to know what was at stake.

That was when Saga Miyuki, Taki's former colleague, now retired and drunk, came into the picture. He was the only surviving Dream Guard who could alternate between the real and the dream worlds and had control over death and life in the dream. But since he wanted nothing to do with what was happening, Taki had been chosen to step up and lead the research team. He was ready to start.

"The lid is going to come off. Everyone, stand back," Choshi Hijiri called out. He held something made of stone that looked like an ancient remote control.

The crowd took a step back, except for Taki and the three appointed men. The Psy Power they felt was more powerful than anything they had ever encountered.

"Whoa," said Domon, eyes wide.

A bluish-white light cast an eerie glow over everyone gathered around the box. Sparks shot from the box, which was overloaded with energy, making everyone look ghostly pale.

"Five . . ." counted the wise old man. "Four, three, two . . ."

Taki tried to relax his muscles, blue sparks raining down on his face.

". . . one, zero!"

Before he finished counting, everything had already happened.

An indescribable color filled the yard, but around the world the damage was done. The training hall in Koyasan blew up. In one crypt in the Matterhorn, five priests died instantly while praying, adding their protection to the barrier.

Below the Ren Plateau, the spirit-power generator erupted in flame, fueling a dormant volcano. In Alaska, icicles exploded out of the ground, causing a flood. The two men in the space shuttle successfully protected themselves against the impact with their Psychic Power, but the ship's control systems were destroyed, leading to the launch of NASA's second shuttle to go and rescue the stranded men.

Malice took the shape of a dream. The physical experience of it varied from that of the real world.

And everyone in the yard knew that every plan they had thought up so far was a placebo. Because even while the beast was not in the real world, it was alive in the dream world.

It was there. At least its spirit was there.

And only the first layer had been opened. The spirit's hands, changing form every second, reached out and grabbed the three men who stood beside Taki. The moment the hands touched them, their bodies became withered and lifeless. A mere glimpse of the beast's spirit, and it was more than they could handle.

Makie moaned, and Taki spun toward her. The spirit

was a white thread one minute and a square column the next. It penetrated Makie's vagina and came out of her mouth. She was being raped at both ends.

Taki sprang to save her, but before he took a step, a strong sensation coursed through his body. Something wrapped around his organ, and before he knew it, he was ejaculating, coming again and again. Taki moaned in pleasure. Still groaning, he released all his Psychic Power into the monster, which had slithered its way up from the hem of his trousers. It crumbled and fizzled out.

He ran to Makie, who had managed to break free by herself.

"You all right?"

"I was so wet. He's better than you."

"Silly girl."

Taki felt defeated. They had been sucked into a dream. This was the spirit's world, his territory, not theirs. They had neither the strength nor skill to get away from it. From somewhere in the distance, he heard Domon and the bearded man fighting. Then he sensed it.

The spirit returned.

Taki pushed Makie behind him as he saw the enemy creeping closer to him without a sound. It came at him from three different directions. Taki tried to get a bead on it, but before he could do anything, it vanished before his eyes. Everything happened in a matter of seconds. The freak's agony was palpable in the air. As chaos unfolded, Taki saw a shadow come down from the dream skies.

"Saga!" Taki yelled.

"Looks like I was on time."

Saga Miyuki—the only Dream Guard in the whole world—wore a winning smile on his bearded face.

DREAM BATTLE

CHAPTER THREE

1

THE SPIRIT of the beast instantly recognized its real enemy. Assuming every possible shape imaginable, it rushed toward the drunkard with the stubby beard.

"Saga!"

As if in response to Taki's voice, Saga lifted his grubby hand upward in an arcing pattern. He generated wind in the dream. Part of the spirit hit the wind full force and shattered like a splash of black ink, fading until there was no trace of it left. The rest of it fell to earth, like a piece of butchered meat.

Saga felt the fear in the wriggling slab of flesh. He said, in an authoritative voice, "Go back."

And off it went, shivering in terror.

Suddenly, from four directions, white spirit threads came at Saga, writhing and squirming. They twisted in the air and turned toward Taki. They attached themselves to his shoulder. Before Taki could tear them away, they seeped into his skin. A sudden unspeakable hate took over his body.

The threads were malice incarnate. Evil in the flesh. Their effect on Taki changed every second. His muscles burst open from inside, splashing blood and fragments of flesh. It was called Malice Explosion, a phenomenon only possible in a dream. Taki mustered his Psychic Power in order to dampen its dark energy before the enemy could go through some kind of a chemical change inside him.

A burning sensation in his stomach caused him to scream in pain. He was not fast enough. The malice had broken out into a spontaneous fire. Purple-tipped tongues of flame blasted out of Taki's mouth and nostrils. He grabbed the lances of fire and shoved them back down his throat, focusing his power on controlling it. He had a general idea of what would happen if he brought a scar back from the dream world, but he wasn't sure what would happen to his hands.

"Taki!"

Makie ran to him, her voice and every movement graceful as ever. Sometimes Taki wondered if the woman from the other side really loved him. Right now, it seemed she did.

"Are you all right?"

"Barely."

"Why are you smiling?"

"Nothing." Taki wiped off the nervous smile and got ready for the showdown.

Saga was covered in white threads, his torso encased by them like a cocoon. His arms and legs were barely visible; other loose threads had gotten hold of them, twining around, covering them. Most of his head was swathed, with only the tips of his hair showing, like weeds in a white desert.

Having taken in the horrible pain and nausea the white threads dished out, Taki wondered what kind of malice could be tormenting Saga right now.

Bwam! The sound was merely a product of Taki's imagination, but it was appropriate for what happened. Saga's body exploded, bursting the surface of the white cocoon.

"Stay back," Taki ordered, thrilled to see Makie holding her breath.

"But—"

"Do you really think he's dead?"

"Yes," Makie replied. "How could he not be?"

"He was my partner for seven years." Taki grinned. "Just watch. This is the Dream Guard we're talking about."

Makie's eyes opened wide as the bloody pieces of meat started going backward, like a video being played in reverse. Was it an illusion, or for real? In the gloom of the dream world, the pieces formed Saga Miyuki again.

"Idiots," Taki cursed. "They should have known better."

Saga, on the other hand, was quiet as he raised his right hand, his eyes almost sorrowful. The malice threads charged toward him again and took a sudden turn before being sucked into his palm. Saga grasped every thread in his hand and pulled them away, his face deadpan.

Taki pressed his temples, and Makie let out a groan. All the tension that had been building throughout the encounter broke, and everything started to fade away. Most people would call it waking up, but the three Black Guards recognized it as a loss and absorption of space.

The gloom deepened into real darkness. Stars appeared in the sky above. The smudgy long shadows turned into shrubs, and there stood the familiar building of the Hospital, looking serene under the starry skies.

They were back in the courtyard.

With a whoosh, a shadow flew into the wooden box sitting a few meters from them.

Bam! The lid fell shut. There was a whoop from somewhere nearby—Domon, the old man, and the others. They had survived.

"We woke up," Makie whispered to Taki.

"Yeah. Everyone's in one piece—no, we lost those three." He pointed to the remains of the three Black Guards that had gone down when the box had been opened.

Makie remained silent, staring at old men kneading their scalps and necks, and when she confirmed that they

were fine, she turned to face Saga, who was walking toward them.

"Nice and tidy, huh?" She smelled the liquor on his breath.

"We owe you. I'm so glad you made it. When you've got a hangover and everything," Taki said teasingly.

The Dream Guard smiled at him and gestured toward the box. "Want to peek inside? Don't worry. The lid stays closed," Saga said.

The three of them, Saga, Taki, and Makie, inched closer to the box containing the dream rapist.

Taki hesitated. "What if the beast . . ."

Saga shook his head. "No worries. That was just a part of him. Wait until you see the spirit of the beast in the second layer. No, what we saw was just a tiny bit of the beast, and look what a mess it made."

Noting the edge in his voice, Taki glared at the man who used to be his colleague.

"Don't look so mad," Saga said. "You've seen the beast for the first time. At least you came out of this with something. Let me tell you, I can't help you with the incubus lurking in the third layer. I don't know why we haven't heard anything about the beast in the pot completely destroying the town. Anyway, you'll see soon enough."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this from a Dream Guard," Taki said, amused.

"I know what I can do and what I can't. We can look a little bit. But—"

"But?"

"There's just one catch."

Saga's hand trembled as it stroked the surface of the lid. Taki felt chills run down his spine. "You—you're not goi—"

"There's no other way. If the only cure for deadly poison is more poison, then we treat it that way. We're going to unleash this dream rapist."

A chorus of amazed voices erupted around Taki, and he realized he was not the only person Saga was talking to.

Saga chuckled. "It's hardly surprising, is it? Ever since the Black Guard Council was established, it's been a circulating argument. We can play them against each other."

"That's right." The old man spoke at last, bouncing his long white beard in his palm. "It's been talked about as a last resort. In fact, the human world and the demonic world set up a project team for it. However, our ancient great WQQZ team came up with a way to capture the beasts before we got around to it."

WQQZ was the name of the highest god in the other world. Nobody had figured out whether he was a benign deity for the human world or not.

The manager gave the deep sigh that came with difficult decisions. "There's no other way. We have to take our chances with it."

Taki was mildly surprised that the manager approved this radical method.

Beast against beast.

The idea itself had been discussed by those higher up in the council, well before the pot had been stolen. All materials recording how the fearful beasts had been sealed inside the box and pot had gone missing. The Ancient History team had launched a search, but so far nothing.

Poison for poison. It seemed the only way. Research on ancient monuments conducted by the Black Guard in the fourth century B.C. had unearthed piles of ancient documents and wall paintings. According to them, the beasts had imprinted in the memories of the ancients that they hated each other's guts.

"But before we make that decision, we have to discuss what we're going to do with the last man standing. You can't count on the possibility that both go down." Taki stared at Domon. "And you should consider how this duel will affect both our worlds and the dream world. From what we just saw, you should have a pretty good idea. Even if our plan pans out, we'll have a lot of blood on our hands."

All eyes fell to the three corpses lying on the ground. The bodies lay there, completely dried out, almost mummified. The work of the dream rapist.

"But . . ." Domon's eyes were solemn, still fixed on the bodies. "On the other hand, we've got no choice. We can't let them wreak havoc on our two worlds."

Taki couldn't believe what he was hearing. "No. Give us more time." The determination in his voice gave it an

edge. "Whoever took the pot still doesn't know how to bust out the beast, only let out a little piece. They're no better than we are. Maybe we can figure out how to tame it, or track down the thieves before they get around to unleashing more hell."

"Doubtful."

Taki turned to Makie, shocked by her reaction. The beautiful face of the alien was calm and clear as the moon.

Domon nodded. "She's right. We've tried everything, power research, water magic, and what not. It's a big world, and we don't have enough manpower—"

"Domon." Taki closed his eyes and crossed his arms. A moment of heavy silence.

He opened his eyes to see everyone looking at him.

Saga put his hand on Taki's shoulder. "Taki—open the lid."

"What?!"

"Use your receiver and let people know. Now, quick."

Taki's gaze fell on the slender slab of stone in his right hand. *Something is not right*, he thought.

"But—" Not knowing what and how to say it, he closed his mouth.

"Come on, Taki," Makie urged. She stared at Taki, her eyes twinkling. *Makie's eyes don't twinkle.*

Domon was watching.

The director was watching.

The wise old man was watching.

Taki gave a resigned nod. He brought the receiver up

to his mouth and coughed. His voice came out deep, husky, and powerful.

"We're still in a dream. Go back to where we came from."

White sparks of light came out of Makie's eyes, and the eyes of everyone else gathered around him. Suddenly millions of threads tangled around Taki.

The world shook. Reality lost its colors. The trees melted, blending into the fences of the Hospital. People became mingled into the mess. Stars sped across the sky, creating streaks of light. The ground undulated beneath Taki's feet.

A voice came from a distance. "Keep your eyes closed."

It fell on Taki's deaf ears.

The lid of the wooden box popped open, and that was when Taki found out that the world was one big curtain. Everything that blended together around him—trees, the earth, branches, and stars—all poured into the wooden box with a thundering noise. Things moved faster and faster, the stars turning into a meteor shower, a belt of light. Everything crumbled and blended into one plume of smoke as Taki stood under the same old night skies, stunned.

The night air took on a chill. Tree branches thrashed in the wind, as did the white fence of the Hospital and the building. The starry sky. Everything was the same as before.

"That was close." Saga Miyuki's left hand was still on

the lid of the box. "Good thing you weren't fooled. They made you believe that you had woken from the dream, when in fact you'd been dragged into another one."

Taki remained quiet as Makie's footfalls came closer from behind him. Her voice was cold but soft. "The idea was to trick you into letting it out, but they can't touch the stone remote control. So they used you, Taki."

"Double dream?" Taki said cautiously. "This isn't a dream, is it?"

"All I can say is that we're fine." Makie's voice had a cool ring to it.

Domon and the director and the old man walked toward them, shaking their heads. They were all exceptional psychics, which was why they always survived.

"So this is . . ." the wise old man inquired, pointing at Taki's old partner.

"Saga Miyuki. He's the only Dream Guard in all of the two worlds."

"Oh! Nice to meet you," the wise old man said excitedly. Then his voice took on a wary tone. "Dream Guard. You're a legend. And it's an honor."

Taki shook Saga's hand. "I'm so glad you changed your mind, Saga. The world is grateful to you."

The old man stroked his beard. "Our object tonight was to learn something about the beasts. I believe we've got it now. What our illusion-selves said back there had some truth to it. Only a beast can bring down another beast. Watching one of them raising hell out there, I'm sure people would be happy to let out the other one."

"But you handled a part of it, Saga," Domon said confidently.

Saga waved away the compliment. "What I dealt with tonight was just a shapeless spirit made of grudge. The grudge in the second layer. That's as far as I go. Still, my odds are fifty percent," Saga said.

"So the freak that is raising hell out there is from the first layer of the pot?"

"Without a doubt," said Taki. "That means they haven't succeeded in awakening the beast. We've got to find them quickly."

"I beg to differ. You have forgotten something," Makie said cooly. "Mr. Saga has established that he cannot compete with the beast of the third layer. We need to take action before the third one gets out."

"Or we can go through old records and documents, hoping to find a way to tuck the beast away," the wise old man said, his white beard trembling.

"We're on it, but it's slow," Taki explained. "We're hoping we can find something from Megiddo or the catacombs of Roma, but so far no luck. We will continue searching, but don't get your hopes up too much. We should come up with something else."

Nobody nodded. There was no need.

"What about the possibility of the thieves getting to the second layer of the pot?" the director asked, toying with his glasses.

Taki replied, "It's not easy even for them to break the seal. My guess is that they took it believing they'd find the

beast in the first layer. Without a remote, it's nearly impossible to open the door to any layer. The lower you go, the harder it gets to open."

"The pot and this wooden box were three-layered from the beginning," the old man said. His voice was colder than the chill settling into the courtyard. "Probably ancient people knew there would be an eventual leakage when the pot was made. This was bound to happen someday. Or . . ."

All eyes were on him, expectant of his next word. "Or—what we confronted tonight. That might have been just a tip of the iceberg of what the beast can do, just a tiny part of what our ancient ancestors expected . . ."

Silence fell. Under the starry skies, that one particular corner remained cold and ghostly.

"Good old times," Domon mumbled. "Well, we can't just stand here worrying. What we need right now is more time for research and . . ." His narrow eyes glared with a new intensity at the grubby man who had been keeping his mouth shut for a while, the eyes of a hawk going for its prey. "The Dream Guard certainly took his time coming here. We need his help, whether it be for the second layer or the third. We need him to stay with us until we figure something out."

"Sorry, but I'm unemployed right now," Saga said matter-of-factly, rubbing his hands. "So I don't have to listen to you. I could stay in and be drunk all I want. I dragged my ass down here because I wanted to help. And

look what it got me into. Don't count on a citizen." He strode away without taking a single glance at the box.

Taki followed the gawky body moving toward the gate. "Look, you confronted the beast. In or out, they will come after you."

"I don't think so. They've got better things to do."

The smell of liquor shot up Taki's nostrils as he fell in line with Saga. "Then we have to get another guard to protect you. Look, we're shorthanded as it is. We don't want to waste a guard on a drunkard."

"Honesty is the best policy, eh? Leave me alone." Saga turned around and reached out his right hand, as if he expected Taki to give him something. "What I did tonight was force of habit. Nonetheless, I saved your life. I want a little appreciation."

Taki glared at Saga as his lips curved up in a smirk. He took his wallet from an inside pocket and handed ten thousand yen over to him.

"Whoa. I guess your pay is good. What a nice life you live."

Taki grabbed Saga's fingers as he tried to snatch the money. "Why did you come?"

"You're hurting me. What? You're suddenly sounding all mushy. Give me a break."

"Answer me."

Saga got his scruffy face closer to Taki's pale, intelligent one and let out a stinky breath. "This. Look here. I've come for the money."

The stubby fingers slipped out of Taki's grasp. Saga crumpled the bill in his hand.

"Okay," Renzaburo Taki muttered resignedly.

Saga suddenly seemed far away, looking into the night sky.

Taki tried one last appeal. "Tomorrow comes, and people are still having those awful dreams. I thought it was your job to stop it . . ."

Saga's stooped back never stopped as he shuffled his way to the gate and went through it and disappeared.

The moon hovered in the skies quietly, watching over humans in the grip of nightmares, their faces masks of horror.

2

A SMALL pot sat in the middle of the room. It was fifty centimeters high and looked like an egg with both ends cut out and a lid on it. The pot was made of a smooth stone. A plain old pot. It sat in the center of an empty, bleak room. No table. No chair. The only light came from a bare lightbulb dangling on a thin cord from the ceiling.

The dreary orange light did not reach all of the spacious, thirty-tatami-mat-sized room, leaving the corners depressingly dark. Every now and then the bulb swayed

with a long, muffled creak, casting splotches of orange light on the person in black who sat in the corner, considering the pot.

The Shinjuku station. It swarmed with people on their way to work. Or maybe the Mitsukoshi department store in Nihonbashi on an end-of-the-year sale day.

Put this pot in one corner of some busy space. Within ten seconds, the chatter would almost disappear. Two more seconds, absolute silence. People would stop and start looking around for something strange. Everything would be the same—announcements blared from the speaker, the same background music. But something would feel different. People, feeling something off, would hunch their shoulders or straighten their collars, looking around nervously. They would keep searching, forgetting about grabbing a seat on a packed train or hunting for bargains.

The figure in the corner of the room thought about the scene and smiled. *Yeah, let's hide it. Somewhere nobody would notice.*

Drill a hole in the concrete pavement of the Shinjuku station and drop it in. Or maybe in the Ginza district. Sneak it into a whisky box and put it in a show window.

People would keep looking, not knowing what they were looking for, all wearing blank stares, like zombies. The search would never end as long as the pot was there.

After thirty minutes, they would start falling. The paramedics would arrive and try to get them out before the pot had a chance to exert its deadly power on them.

And then the horrifying discovery. The paramedics would scratch their heads and wonder why the people were shopping in the department store when it looked like they hadn't eaten for a month. Or maybe they would ask themselves why those men would be riding the train to work in a suit and tie when they were dying.

The victims would be so weakened they would have become skin and bones. The paramedics would be thrilled to find the pulse on any of them. But their bodies would be so light even a child could lift them with one hand. Like dead leaves.

The paramedics would never know the truth because they cannot imagine it. If they could, they would be able to see that the people have fallen in an orderly spiral fashion like some kind of a geometric pattern.

And the center of the spiral is a corner of the room.

Where the pot sits.

A dull vibration hit the room, and the shadowy figure looked up. The bulb bounced about, shining its orange light on her face. The color suited the ugly skin, which was reminiscent of moth-eaten wood. Everything on her face was in the wrong place. The figure, which was human, had been born with it. She gave off a strange, sweet smell that filled the stagnant air.

"Our enemies—they're set." A cold and mechanical voice emanated from the very air. "The other box was opened and closed." The voice centered in another cor-

ner of the room. No one was there. Or maybe it was just that the faint light missed that particular corner.

"The box is supposed to remain open, Tendo."

"Yes, ma'am," replied the voice, which was male.

The woman did not look at the place where the voice came from. "Whatever happened to our plans of attacking Roma and Megiddo?"

"We've sent a team of experts on their way."

She chuckled. "Experts, huh? Better than you?"

"Certainly," said Tendo. There was a smile in his voice that showed he took the woman's inquiry as praise. And it was.

"Okay. You and your son take care of those Japanese."

"Certainly. So who . . . ?"

"One is called Renzaburo Taki. And there's a little whore named Makie. And last but not least . . . the Dream Guard."

Tendo's voice, which had seemed filled with confidence, fell silent at Taki's name, and then exclaimed in shock at the mention of the last.

"You mean the legendary Dream Guard? I thought he was dead. This is going to be interesting."

"Don't let down your guard." Wariness entered the woman's voice. "Whether we succeed or not depends on those three. They're the best in the Far East Black Guard."

"Don't worry about it," Tendo said. His voice trembled, but not with fear. He was thrilled.

"Follow Taki and Makie, you'll find out where the

Dream Guard is. While you're at it, I will unleash the beast from the second layer. It's going to take quite a bit out of me now that I'm old. Now, go. Take as many killing machines as you need. From both sides."

"Certainly."

The voice was gone. Whether the speaker had left or remained in the room, the woman could not tell. Perhaps he had never been there at all.

In the droning darkness, the woman stood and shuffled across the floor toward the pot.

Her eyes opened wide. "It's been moved! Someone else has touched my pot!"

The woman's face was as pale as a corpse. "Idiots. . . . I told them . . . I told them . . . But who could it be . . . No—"

There was another dull thud, shaking the room. The light danced wild above the woman's head again, revealing a face drained of color.

3

AH . . . OOH . . ." Masayo Higuchi lay on the floor, moaning. To her right was the glass door to the bathroom and the foyer. The door on her left led to the bedroom. Masayo was on her hands and knees in the hall. Her naked

breasts were pressed flat on the floor, her ass high in the air. Masayo was supple. She had been a gymnast in high school. Now, at twenty-nine, she had put on some meat. If she bent over, two lines would appear across her abdomen. But she had been muscular when she was young and still looked good.

The boy liked that about her, liked sliding his cock between the white big cheeks of a twenty-nine-year-old housewife and into her pussy. It felt so good having his rigid penis buried deep inside her. It was wet and hot.

He was a cleaning boy. He was going on nineteen this year and had already developed a yearning for housewives. Better ripe than green, he always boasted to his pals. He had been on a prowl, going from door to door to find a housewife for his pleasure. Masayo's body was the answer to the boy's distorted youthful desire. She was large and plump, soft and succulent. His fingers almost sank into her skin as he grasped her ass to pull himself farther inside her.

Her breasts and thighs begged to be licked. She had a nice face—big eyes and fleshy lips. That was how a dirty little whore ought to look, the boy thought. He wondered how she looked in bed.

Her husband was a regular working man. He was not home during the day. The apartment was located on the seventh floor. Nobody could hear anything that went on inside. The boy had made several visits to her before making any moves, in order to read her personality. She was good-natured, not weak but easy to manipulate. He

knew if he pressed hard enough, she would give in. She would not push him away if he said the right thing. She might resist a little but would not treat him badly if he was nice to her.

He had this figured out—he would play a nice, wholesome cleaning boy. He bought some apples and bananas from the market and brought them to her, saying that they were from one of his relatives. Next time he went to her place, she invited him in and offered a cup of coffee or tea. He was small and pale, which made him seem harmless. Or maybe she was just a bored housewife waiting for something to happen.

One summer day, the boy rang the bell. Masayo opened the door wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around her naked body. She said she was just taking a shower. She bent forward, revealing her deep, soft cleavage.

He pushed his way inside and pinned her to the kitchen floor. She put up a fight. She used to be an athlete, so she was strong. That only got him hotter. He held her arms down and peeled off the towel with his mouth.

Masayo did not stop struggling, even stark naked. He went for her nipples, caressing them with his mouth. That ended it; she gave in, and he was hard. He had been waiting for this. Now she was all his, right here for the taking on the kitchen floor. The door was unlocked. Anyone could walk in. That turned him on. He did not care about the social repercussions. He would look for

another job. Her husband would not track him down or report him to the police. No, he would not go that far.

The problem was with Masayo. Once the word got out, she would not be able to stay in the apartment. Her husband would never forgive her. Even if he did not divorce her, she would have to spend the rest of her life begging for forgiveness. He would find every opportunity to remind her of what she had done.

Lock the door, Masayo had asked. She wasn't pleading; on the contrary, she had never felt so excited in her life. What if someone walked in? And saw her in this state? It was a humiliating thought, but it made her so hot she shuddered.

The boy licked her big breasts, barking like a dog, kneading them like a madman.

Masayo thought it would be a missionary position. She spread her legs for him. But he flipped her over. His mind was made up. Straight missionary was no way to fuck a housewife nearing thirty. He wanted to bang her from behind.

That became his routine when he visited her. He would start with the licking, until she begged for him to fuck her, and then get her on all fours. He preferred a cramped space—he could not forget the excitement of that first time in the kitchen.

Masayo knew what made him tick. He never wanted to do it on the bed. Most of the time they did it in the kitchen, but sometimes they went to the bathroom or the

living room. Always on the floor. He would strip her naked first and fuck her from behind. That got her hot, too.

"How do you like it, huh?" the boy asked, grinding into her. It was his usual question. He used to come up with a new question every time, but lately he had settled on this one. He had learned all about the housewife—her favorite position, and how many times a week she had sex with her husband. "You want it from in front or behind? Which is it?"

"From behind," Masayo moaned. "Fuck me from behind. You know how I like it."

Her body was on fire. Her pussy was moist and hot as it swallowed his cock. The fact that she was having an affair and that he was doing her on the floor only stirred up her excitement. She knew it pleased him to see her naked ass up in the air. It drove him mad.

She moaned in pleasure. "How's my ass? How do you like a housewife's ass?"

"Great," the boy grunted.

"That's good. I want you to do me harder." Her pleading voice pushed the boy over the edge. Here she was, an ordinary housewife taking orders from a cleaning boy and talking dirty while her husband was out. It was the best sex he had ever had.

"You've got a great ass. It's melting my balls. I'm going to come all over your ass. I can't get enough of you. You're mine, not your husband's. You're mine."

"That's right. I'm all yours." Masayo raised herself up

on her knees and turned to face him. Her eyes were closed. Her tongue slithered out from between her red full lips.

The boy leaned forward and inserted his tongue into her mouth. A brand-new sensation stirred through his hard cock.

"Mm. Mm. Mm." He let his saliva flow into her mouth and swallowed hers. He grabbed her hips and continued to pump in and out of her, then let his hands wander over her breasts, enjoying her moans as he massaged her nipples.

Her tongue stopped wriggling. Wondering why she had stopped, he slowly opened his eyes.

She wore an expression of absolute terror.

"*Eek!*" Masayo let out a shriek. She grabbed his jaw and flung him across the room with mighty force. She was inhumanly powerful.

His cock, still hard, popped out of her, and the back of his head hit the corner of the washing machine.

"No, no, no, no, no! Somebody . . . please . . ." Screaming, Masayo crawled into the kitchen.

Soon enough, the boy came around. He was confused. The only thing he could think of was not to let her get out.

"Bitch. What the fuck are you doing?" He tried to keep his voice down.

Another shriek cut the air.

"Stop it. Why are you doing this? You act like I'm a monster." He pressed down on her mouth with his hand, completely lost. He sat on her stomach and raised his fist.

Two punches and she became quiet. He watched her and found her contorted face arousing. He was hard again. He had not yet ejaculated.

Adrenaline pumped through him, getting him more and more excited. He spread her legs and penetrated her, then dove into her breasts with his mouth. The surge of excitement reminded him of the first time they had sex. He had licked her body countless times, but now it seemed fresh all over again. He rode her hard, sucking her nipples until they were hard.

As he continued to dart his tongue across her skin, Masayo regained consciousness. Something horrible rode on top of her. It had two eyes and one mouth. That alone was enough to make her retch. The thing sat there, grinning at her, a nasty smile.

She closed her eyes.

The monster's sticky, filthy mouth blocked hers. She bit back a scream. She could not take it anymore. There was only one thing she could do.

When the shock of having his tongue bitten off hit the boy, all he could see was red. It did not hurt; his mouth suddenly felt hot. Something sticky dripped from it and then gushed from between his teeth. Masayo screamed again as his blood splattered onto her breasts. Now it hurt. The boy howled in pain. Covering his mouth with his hands, he started kicking and twisting his body around, getting her and himself all bloody.

"Freak . . . freak . . ." It sounded strange, coming from the mangled mouth full of blood.

Masayo stumbled toward the sink and pulled the first knife her hand made contact with off the rack attached to the wall. It was a fish knife, with a thin blade.

The ugly creature kept wriggling on the floor. She was blinded by fear. She held the knife high in the air and dropped it into the squirming worm.

A sharp pain shot into the boy's abdomen. Something hot sank into his flesh. It reached his stomach. Blood spewed from his mouth.

Masayo pulled the knife out and brought it down, this time into his chest. The monster stopped moving. Masayo pulled the knife out and brought it down. Again and again and again.

Suddenly the door opened.

"What happened? Are you all right?"

This time a female. It had an ugly pinkish skin and small eyes and a tiny mouth and disgusting teeth. It had only ten fingers between two hands!

The monster spoke. "What the—Masayo . . . were you raped?"

Masayo raised the knife in her right hand and slashed at the female monster as it edged toward her. There was a dull sound, and filthy liquid spurted from her pale neck.

"Huh?" The woman looked stunned as she held the wound and slumped to the floor.

Masayo pushed the monster aside and bolted out. She found more freaks.

"Masayo . . . what happened? Hey—"

"Watch out! Drop the knife!"

It was pure chaos. Masayo was sure she was surrounded by monsters. It was as if she had transferred to the underworld, but it looked exactly like the world in which she lived. This had to be a nightmare.

The knife was the only thing she had to protect herself with. She flailed it frantically. The freaks, big ones, small ones, threw back their heads or fell, spurting blood.

Help. Please help me. This is a dream. I'm just having a bad dream—

An image of a beautiful man suddenly appeared in her mind. The same image had popped into her mind as she was being raped by the monster. His skin was rugged, like the face of the moon. His eyes were like those of an insect, multifaceted. A grimy tube grew from his mouth. Best of all was his maggot-infested body; it looked so inviting. He was her dream man.

"Help. Please. I want to wake up from this dream," she screamed.

The image of the handsome man got bigger and clearer in her head as she brandished the knife. He stopped right in front of her.

She felt a wave of relief wash over her. "Oh, sweetheart, you've come for me."

His hand steadied her shaking shoulders. "UZZZZ GGGHHHOOOOXXX."

She did not understand a word he said, but she knew he was glad that she was okay. His hands gently grasped her, rubbing her clit and asshole.

"I'm glad. It's you and me . . ." Masayo did not run away as his face got closer to her.

"WCCQQHOOGNNNN . . ." Whispering sweetly, he sank his hands into her pussy and anus.

Masayo was gripped by a weird sensation, not exactly like she was going to come, but pleasant nonetheless. Her vision blurred. A weird, wiggling creature appeared before her.

It was all a dream, Masayo realized. *This is a dream my womb is having.* As Masayo looked on, the funny-looking thing grew arms and legs and developed eyes and a nose.

Masayo was overcome with a wave of dizziness and blacked out as she stood.

The woman who had just killed or injured seven residents of her apartment building with a knife vanished into thin air. A second later, *poof*, she was back in front of the crowd again. Though it should have, it did not surprise those who saw it happen. They chalked it up to a trick of the light. From a distance, they made sure that she was unconscious before they rushed forward to take the knife and tie her up with vinyl tape.

They flinched as they moved down to her stomach. Her white, flat stomach had developed a bump. Like that of a pregnant woman.

4

As Taki walked out of the main office of Raisu Electronics, Nakagiri, his subordinate, stopped him.

"What's up?"

"You going out? I've been assigned to the Senzokuike Ward."

Taki raised his eyebrows and nodded. "Lots of drunkards out there. Good luck."

"Don't worry. I went through his profile. He's someone I aspire to be, no matter what he has become. I will try my hardest to offer him the best night possible."

Nakagiri must have known Taki's history with the client.

"Good luck." With a small nod, Taki continued down the street into the busy Ootemachi district. He flagged down a taxi, but instead, a silver Skyline coupe pulled to the curb in front of him and stopped. •

"Where to, sir?" A pair of familiar starry eyes greeted Taki as the door opened. "Well, come on, are you going or not?" Makie said without a smile.

"When did you learn to drive?" With a bitter smile, Taki got in and closed the passenger's door. The car started moving immediately. It glided along the street as if driven by a professional driver.

"I told you. A model's never too busy."

"So you can sit in a chair—?" Taki noticed a gap, a few centimeters wide, between Makie's buttocks and the driver's seat before he finished the sentence. He looked to the floor; the ball of her foot lay flat on the accelerator. It took him a few seconds to realize she was supporting her whole body on her toes. He had wondered, since he knew she couldn't sit like a human. Sometimes bodies from the other side did things that were physically impossible for humans. "Nice work."

"Thanks. You know what? You should learn, too. Driving, I mean."

"No thanks. So, where are we headed?"

"Ota Medical Center, Yukigaya."

"You've learned the Tokyo map by heart? You never cease to amaze me," Taki said, impressed.

"Can I take that as a compliment?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. It's great when you say nice things about me," Makie said in a flat tone.

Taki laughed and faced forward. Five minutes ago he had received news of a crazed twenty-nine-year-old housewife who had killed or wounded seven people, including a six-year-old girl, in a rampage with a fish knife. More shocking, and definitely more disturbing to Taki, was that the housewife seemed to have conceived a baby sometime right before the attack.

The attack itself was not unusual. There have been many documented cases of ordinary people suddenly

going insane and turning violent. Inevitably, someone from the demonic world was involved. In the research room at Raisu Electronics, a cover for Taki's Black Guard unit, thousands of reports had been gathered, reports of these cases from the police or ICPO of any one of 120 countries all around the world.

"What's your take on this one?" Makie inquired, without moving her body.

"It's the beast's boy—his grudge. Without a doubt. This isn't our first. Although—"

"Although . . ." Makie repeated his word. She had been brought up to speed on this horrific but rather common case. "What are you thinking?"

"We'll wait and see," Taki muttered.

"A fatherless baby. From a womb dream," Makie said.

"How did it happen?" Taki said. "The dream just conceived it, all by itself?"

"We can ask. Taki, this is huge," Makie said.

"A dream's baby, huh?" *How tricky*, Taki thought, but decided not to voice his insecurities.

Makie pulled the car around a corner. "Any precedent cases?"

"Someone hasn't done his homework," Taki teased. "Fortunately, zero. On the other hand, that can be a problem. We don't know what to expect."

"Let's hope we're in time. It's a cat-and-mouse game," Makie said.

"This mouse is stronger than the cat." Taki was silent

for a moment, then decided to change the subject. "This is some wacky car you've got here."

"I know. The components are all from this world, but they put them together in the other world."

"No wonder it moves smoothly. So, what splendid specs does it have?"

Makie glanced in the rearview mirror and frowned. "Someone's following us."

"I know," Taki said.

Makie peered over at Taki and smiled. "Can't get anything past you, right?"

Taki shifted his gaze to the side mirror. A single rickshaw separated Makie's car and the cars behind them. The driver, who wore a black jacket, appeared alone. The seat of the rickshaw was pulled down but empty, and the driver pedaled easily, as he would if he wasn't pulling any weight. Taki knew better. Just because he couldn't see anyone didn't mean there was no one there. Maybe whoever was sitting in the backseat moved with the same agility, or had made himself so light so as not to be a burden to the driver.

"Any thoughts?" Taki asked, sliding his right hand under his left armpit.

"Nope. But they're really getting in our faces, huh? I'd like to take that as a come-on."

"The rickshaw man and the passenger. Both demons?"

Makie turned on the car radio. *Rhapsody in Blue* came from the speakers. Taki thought it was strange; he'd never figured Makie for a classical music lover.

"Get it?" Makie's tone was playful. She was trying to tell him to look for the hidden message behind the choice in music. The car's radio analyzed the situation and played an appropriate piece of music.

Taki chuckled. "The rickshaw man is a fighting machine. I'm getting nothing about the passenger. That's a pretty amazing diagnostic gizmo." Taki hefted the cold iron of his .44 Magnum in his hand. The buzz of electricity ran along his fingers, a physical sign of the Psy Power he had pumped into the hollow-point bullet.

"What if we don't take them on?" Taki said. "Couldn't we just create an eldritch space?"

"That would work better for us. This car is equipped with a Space-Molder. It's still in the testing phase but will beat most reinforcement rates. We'll have a better chance of getting out in one piece," Makie explained.

"Interesting," Taki said, impressed. There was a twinkle in his eyes; he loved a good fight. "This gives us a good chance to witness the level of their technology. Shall we make the first move?"

"Wait. The Hospital comes first," Makie said.

She did not need to stop him. The traffic slowed, and the Skyliner glided its way out of Ootemachi and onto the highway. The rickshaw was nowhere to be seen.

SPY

CHAPTER FOUR

1

It was very quiet outside the patient's room, which seemed comical when compared to the madness in the Hospital lobby, with all the police and the press swarming to get information.

There was a faint, flowery smell in the air. Perhaps some romantic nurse had sprayed a rose perfume, Taki supposed. It didn't cover the antiseptic, horrible smell of a hospital, though. With his Psychic Power, Taki managed to keep down the sudden urge to bolt and realized what the flowery smell actually was. "Forced Separation," a potion created by the Black Guard Tech Lab. It was very handy to have when an ordinary human walked in

on something as delicate as an interrogation. A mere ten-thousandth of a milligram of the potion released into the air would make someone feel uncomfortable, struck by an urgent need to leave the vicinity immediately. Suddenly there was a call that did not need to be made. A Coke they really did not want to buy. The urge to go to the restroom. The potion took at least two hours to wear off. Until then, anyone who was affected by the potion would not come back to the area.

As if to prove a point, a nurse turned the corner and walked in his direction. After a few steps, she came to a halt, turned around, and went back the way she came, as if she had suddenly forgotten something.

A man in a suit stood in front of the patient's door, halfway down the hall. He bowed to Taki and Makie as they approached. As soon as the patient arrived at the Hospital, Taki's bosses had dispatched the nearest Black Guard. Perhaps he was the one that had sprayed the potion.

"Good day. Anyone inside?" Makie asked.

"A colleague of mine. The police haven't started with the interrogation," the man replied in a deep voice.

"How about the child?"

"Any minute now. It's not like she needs a doctor or a nurse."

"Thanks. Watch the door, will you?"

With that, Makie and Taki went inside. A middle-aged woman in a well-cut purple suit sat by the bed. She turned

her head toward the door and gave them a small nod. The agent appeared to be human.

"How's she holding up?" Makie inquired. She peered into the bed at the woman, whose complexion was deeply jaundiced.

"The fetus is getting bigger. I ran a Psy scan on it. No cardiac sounds, no nothing. Ever heard of a phantom pregnancy? A woman develops a bump, has all the symptoms of pregnancy, but she's not pregnant."

The patient groaned, as if confirming what the woman had said. The woman leaned forward and asked what was wrong.

"Please get it out . . . Uh. It hurts," the patient whispered. She rubbed her stomach. It appeared she had gone into labor.

Makie glanced at the patient's bulging belly below the sheet. In the few hours since the killing spree, she had gone through ten months of pregnancy.

What about the baby? Makie thought. What would the Dream Child be like?

The patient's body twitched. As if by an invisible force, her legs were pried open wide until they were at right angles to her upper body. There was a dull popping sound as her hip joints were dislocated. But there was no cry of pain from the woman.

"Stay back!" Taki pulled out his weapon and aimed the six-inch barrel at the patient's genitals. Makie also aimed her weapon—a silver Beretta M84—at the woman.

The female guard slid her right hand into her handbag and edged away from the bed.

The housewife gripped the edges of the mattress with both hands. Her body extended like a rubber band. A plume of multicolored smoke billowed out from her mouth; her body stretched out beyond the breaking point. Finally, she let out a scream of pain.

The next instant, the room was flooded with water from the woman's womb. When it subsided, something stood on the floor at the end of the bed. A purplish, lumpy thing that looked human.

"It's the bodyguard for the fetus!" Taki yelled. "Shield your consciousness with PP. Now, before he can burn you!"

The room was suddenly charged with black energy. The female guard screamed and covered her head. Suddenly streaks of red light shot out of her nostrils, mouth, and between her fingers. The room turned scarlet.

"You take care of the bodyguard," Taki said to Makie.

Makie aimed her Beretta at the assailant. There was a world of difference between her 9 mm and Taki's M29. What the Beretta lacked in power, though, she made up for with her Psy Power. Makie pulled the trigger and shot a fireball into the bodyguard's head. Five more shots blew off most of its head, and it slumped down to the floor.

Taki kept an eye on the housewife's crotch. She had pushed out the bodyguard to distract them while she delivered her baby. The things demons could think up in order to survive.

Taki tightened his finger on the trigger of his weapon and waited for the unspeakable thing to emerge from the trembling housewife. He couldn't help but gasp as it was born. The baby looked completely human. Taki wondered if it looked normal because it was half dream and half reality.

The child's form never changed, but strange things happened to it. Its adorable arms were suddenly covered with bubbling scales, and a crack ran along its smooth back.

It did not cry. It did not look scared. It just lay on the floor, looking quite content. Then its tongue extended like a snake's. It scooped out a chunk of the floor, as if it were made of ice cream, and the baby swallowed it. Within a few seconds, something emerged from its buttocks, thin and papery. What it ate was being expelled as feces.

Taki and Makie watched as the blob of waste grew to adult human size, detached itself from the fetus, and fluttered to the bed, where it attached itself to the housewife's face. The housewife lay dead, the feces forming a weird kind of shroud.

Another chunk of Dream Baby shit flew to the wall and turned into something otherworldly.

"The room has become . . . a dream," Makie muttered, almost reverently. Demons reacted differently to the bizarre than humans, Taki thought. He was repulsed by what was happening. And then he understood.

"It eats reality and squeezes it out as a dream. The more it eats, the faster we lose reality." Even before Taki

finished his thought, a spear of orange light flashed from the end of his gun, roaring like thunder in the small room. Taki's .44 Magnum hollow-point bullet pounded into the baby, splattering fragments of flesh on the wall and floor. The baby's body flew into the air and hit the window. The wound didn't seem to slow him down. He continued to eat and produce excrement.

Taki pulled the trigger five more times, in quick succession. The bullets blew off the baby's arms and legs, leaving stumps of disfigured flesh behind. Taki was trying to load three more bullets when Makie gently interrupted him with her hand.

"It's over. The baby's dead," Makie said.

Taki looked up. The small head, which had been separated from the body by the barrage of bullets, sat in the corner. The dark red tongue was two feet away, wiggling about on the floor like a piece of dried-out beef. Taki scanned the patient and the wall. The four corners started to lose shape and spread out without a sound.

"We're entering a dream. The whole building is!"

"No," Makie said softly. "The whole world is. I'll get a unit."

"What can they do? Nothing like this has ever happened before!"

Makie paused, her phone to her ear. "I can detach this whole floor into an eldritch space."

That seemed the only way. Taki rushed toward the female guard and lifted her limp body. He let his Psychic

Power flow into her, analyzing her health. Her brain showed signs of activity. Hopefully, the only effect she would suffer was amnesia.

"Let's get out of here." Taki led Makie into the hall.

The man guarding the door looked surprised when he saw them. "What happened?" he said.

"You didn't hear a thing?"

"No," the man said.

Taki nodded and continued down the corridor.

2

At the end of the corridor, a shadow shifted on the wall to the right. A man in a black jacket followed it around the corner, pulling a rickshaw. The driver did not stop at the sight of Taki, Makie, and the guard. His footwork was light, his breathing regular. He changed rhythmically. Taki was immediately wary, and not just because a rickshaw was in a hospital hallway. This was a dream, after all. No, there was something else.

Something white flashed at the end of the rickshaw's handlebar. Taki whirled away just in time to dodge the blade. The male guard was not so lucky; it grazed his abdomen and broke a window beyond. The blade retracted in a heartbeat.

The rickshaw man had disappeared by the time Taki realized it was a trick. The man wasn't gone, had only shifted position. He came down on them from above, hard. Taki handed off the female guard to the male guard and crossed his arms to receive the blow.

The rickshaw man flipped in the air and landed behind them. The rickshaw itself blocked their other exit route. A plume of purple smoke leaked from it. Finally, a passenger was visible in the backseat.

"Take her." The male guard passed his partner to Makie and made a dash for the car.

"Don't!" Even before Taki finished the word, the blade of silver light had shot from the seat and penetrated the man's heart. With a thud so hard it shook the walls, the man's clothing was blown to black shreds. It was a Psychic attack.

Makie received a fresh blow of Psy Power just before the man's naked body turned to dust.

Taki was unable to move. Then two things happened at once. Makie, covered in blood, and the rickshaw man flew toward each other. Makie jumped onto the rickshaw man.

Taki pulled out his M29 with impossible speed. The rickshaw man's shape started to shift. His lips extended and became pointed. His front teeth became bullets, each shooting at high velocity. The enamel bullets were answered by the chromium molybdenum steel ones from Taki's gun. Blood spurted from Taki's face. The second

bullet got him. An instant before that, the female guard's body exploded.

The rickshaw man was knocked off balance as his foot flew up to smash Taki's face. As the black foot buzzed past him, Taki rammed his fist, still holding the gun, into the rickshaw driver's crotch.

The rickshaw driver was not a bit fazed. He was just a living organism in the form of a human being. Taki's hand sank up to the wrist in the man's flesh. Taki pulled the trigger of his gun.

The bullet shot out of the top of the man's head; another burst out of his shoulder. Taki flooded the man with his Psy Power, which ricocheted around inside his body. Taki pulled his hand out, and the rickshaw man dropped to the ground and was still.

He heard a gunshot behind him. Absolutely exhausted and weakened from releasing a great amount of Psychic Power, Taki managed to flip in the air.

Makie hovered three feet off the floor. Her beautiful face was contorted with pain. A weird-looking thing was wrapped around her upper body, squeezing the air from her lungs. The thing looked like a combination of a living organism and machine—a living machine.

Its whole body shimmered with steel wires. Steel bones lay beneath its muscle and sinew, the metal integrated with the flesh. It jiggled, like gelatin. Although most of the body was made of flesh and steel, the large fingers that encased Makie's body were stone.

The monster spoke. "You want to shoot me, Taki? I'm going to split this bitch in half. You want to find out if you can put her back together with Psy Power?"

"Tendo . . ." Taki spat out the monster's name, as if the word tasted bitter. Tendo was one of the most evil sorcerers in the human world. And it was obvious he was in cahoots with the other side. His new look was the result of trying to master demonic ways with magic.

"So what is it going to be, Taki? You want to fight me?"

"Let her down," Taki said.

"Let her down?" The man laughed with derision. His strange body sat in the rickshaw seat. "You come here and help her down. Either way, you have to go. She has to go. I'm going to take care of both of you right here and now." He squeezed a little harder, and Makie screamed.

The arms that held Makie were easily three meters long, each finger fifty centimeters. The rickshaw should have tipped over with the weight, and yet it remained steady as if no one were seated inside.

Tendo's voice was grating. "You ready, Taki?" A deadly blade burned through the air and flew at him.

Taki didn't move. There was a burst of light when the blade reached his chest. At the same time, the rickshaw seat swelled and exploded. Tendo's large arms loosened and Makie dropped to the floor.

"You . . . Your Psy Power . . ." Tendo groaned before blacking out. That sorcerer didn't miss a trick, Taki thought. He *had* sent his Psy Power coursing back through the blade into Tendo, just when he received the blow.

Taki looked over the wreckage and was stunned at what he saw. A dark shadow writhed over the rickshaw of its own accord. It had no shape but merely wriggled like a puddle of blackness.

There was a scream from behind them. Taki turned around, bracing himself for whatever was waiting. The steel barrel of his gun slipped from his hand. At the end of the hall stood two nurses in white, their mouths agape, completely rigid with fear.

The Forced Separation potion had worn off.

A voice spoke from inside the shadow. "Busted. Being discreet is part of the job. The same goes for you, doesn't it? We will be in touch." With that, the rickshaw reassembled itself and took off. It ran down the corridor and turned left and disappeared.

"Taki . . ." Makie stumbled toward him.

"Are you all right?" Taki asked.

"I'm fine. You?"

"Yeah. Let's leave this mess to the police and get out of here." Taki grabbed her hand.

Makie gestured toward the two stunned nurses. "What about them?"

"Don't worry. They can't talk. They've gone cuckoo."

"Just to be sure . . ." Maki leaned toward them.

"Leave them be," Taki said firmly. He pulled on her arm. "I wouldn't stop you if they were guards. You need to stay away from ordinary citizens."

"Ha. How kind of you." But Makie complied and dropped her eyes to the floor, to the broken body of the

female guard. Makie had used the body to shield herself against Tendo's blow. The guard had still been alive.

"You owe her a thank-you. She's the reason you survived." Makie shuddered to remember. While she had been captured in the embrace of Tendo's ugly arms, a piece of the woman's liver had hit his face.

"Let's go. They must be onto Saga." Taki ignored what she had said.

Several sets of footfalls got closer. Someone had heard the nurses scream.

Taki and Makie quickly walked off in the direction of the fire escape stairway.

3

WAIT UP, Hanako. Where are you going? What did you make the ramen for?!"

Takigawa Hanako made a funny face at her father as he called her again from behind.

"You're not going to see that bum again, are you?!"

Hanako quickly closed the glass door in order to shut out the annoying voice. She started to run and bumped into something hard.

"Oops. Excuse me," said the man Hanako had hit.

Hanako looked up into the face of an incredibly hand-

some man. He smiled at her. He wore an expensive-looking dark gray suit.

Hanako felt herself blush. The man laughed good-naturedly, then stopped, as if he had just remembered something important.

"It's okay. Maybe you can help me. Do you happen to know where—" The man asked for directions to an apartment building Hanako happened to know very well.

"Sure. Matter of fact, I'm going there now. Why don't you let me accompany you?"

"My lucky day," the man said.

As they started to walk down the rambling street, the man's gaze fell to the delivery box Hanako was carrying.

"Are you delivering that to someone in the building?"

"Yeah. Well, something like that. It's for a friend," she said.

"Right." He reached down and grabbed the handle of the box. "Let me carry that for you."

"What? Why?"

The man shrugged. "I always wanted to know what it's like to hold it."

"You're a funny man. I hope you don't run away with it," Hanako said jokingly.

The man didn't reply, only smiled.

It was a ten-minute walk to the apartment building. The pair stopped in front of the doors.

"Okay, here we are," Hanako said. "What is your room number?"

"Don't know. Thanks. It was fun talking to you," the man said. He walked into the hall on the ground floor mumbling Saga Miyuki's name, leaving behind the faint scent of perfume.

Saga was packing when Hanako walked in. He had decided to run away. He did not know where he would go. There was nowhere to escape to. He had to sleep, no matter where he was. And if he slept, he would dream. So there was really no way out of it. He just wanted—no, needed—to get away from here.

Why had he bothered to go to the Hospital? He regretted going. He was a Dream Guard. It was easy for him to assimilate his spirit with the beast, or any parts of it. The ability came in handy if he was chasing someone, but it could be deadly if he was the one being chased. It was a double-edged sword. He could shield himself within a sturdy concrete wall, or the large iron vault of the Bank of Japan, or he could dive to the bottom of the ocean. He could move to outer space, but there was nowhere he could hide where dreams would not find him. Time and space did not exist in dreams. If his mind fell into the place of dreams, the beast would be there, waiting for him.

There was only one way to throw the beast off the scent—cut off his assimilation with the beast's spirit. Saga was capable of it. He would be able to enter the enemy's dream without being noticed. No one was powerful enough to beat him when he was inside. Once he was

invited in, Saga would assert dominance over the host's mind and the dreams would become his.

When Saga was in charge in the dream, he became immortal. Imagine a kid who becomes a superhero in his dream and defeats a bully, or a regular working man who daydreams about getting revenge on his mean boss and passing through the door of a motel room with a beautiful executive secretary to live happily ever after. Saga cutting his assimilation was like that. When Saga took over, the host would become weaker and weaker in the real world until he could not tell the difference between dream and reality. So what if the host demon stopped having dreams? Saga would be in control. He could do whatever he wanted in the dream.

Inside a demon's dream, he could make the demon stop the war, or confess all of its evil plans and eventually kill itself. It would be his enemy's worst nightmare. Saga was the one warrior who was able to prevent despicable demons from invading people's dreams and turning them into his puppets. The man's mission was to protect peaceful dreams.

The Black Guards had called him Dream Guard. But that was a long time ago. Now, he could not even control his own mind. He had been reduced to a coward who could not help running when the kitchen got too hot.

"Where are you going, Mr. Saga?"

Hanako's voice snapped Saga back into reality.

"You scared me, Hana. Uh, I was just tidying up."

"Are you going somewhere?"

"No . . ."

"No, Mr. Saga. I don't want you to go."

Saga was surprised to see tears glinting in the corners of her big eyes. He had met Hanako in a cafeteria, about a year ago. It was the first time he had eaten there. He was still not sure what she saw in him. Ever since that day, she had dropped by a couple of times a week. She did not seem to mind the inept hermit's disgusting habits. She would let herself into his shabby apartment and talk about her day at high school, then go on her way. If it had not been for her, Saga was sure he would have been found dead on a cold bench or in his room a long time ago.

"Don't go," Hanako pleaded.

"No. I'm not going anywhere," Saga lied. He had to pretend. If someone heard that he was leaving and told the landlord, that greedy bastard would demand the three months' rent Saga owed. And when Saga couldn't pay up, the landlord would make him do the most unpleasant thing he could think of—chores in his kitchen. Saga's lie would not give him much time to get away. Three days at the most.

He had to go. No matter what lay ahead, he didn't belong here anymore.

"What's wrong?" Hanako asked as she wiped the tears from her eyes. Perhaps she noticed something in his brooding profile. "You don't like it when I cry? I'm sorry. No more tears. Please don't leave. Please. I'll do something about the rent. I can get you food every day."

Saga wanted to scream. It wasn't the poor girl's fault.

He placed his hand on her shoulder. "I was just tidying up. Really. I can't leave here. Not now. I'm three months behind in my rent."

Finally Hanako smiled. "That's good."

Saga tried to return the smile, but his heart wasn't in it. "Why do you look after a middle-aged man like me?"

Hanako smiled faintly. Her smile always lit up the room. How could he push her away when she smiled that adorable smile?

"Not telling," she said, pushing out her breasts.

Saga smiled thinly. "Well, that's that. Go home."

"Why? I brought you something. God, the ramen might have gone soft." Hanako opened the box and took out a bowl of steaming noodle soup. "Here you go. Extra large."

"Thanks. I'll pay for it at the end of the month," Saga said, wondering when that would be.

"I can loan you the money." The new, teasing voice from the door inspired two reactions in the room.

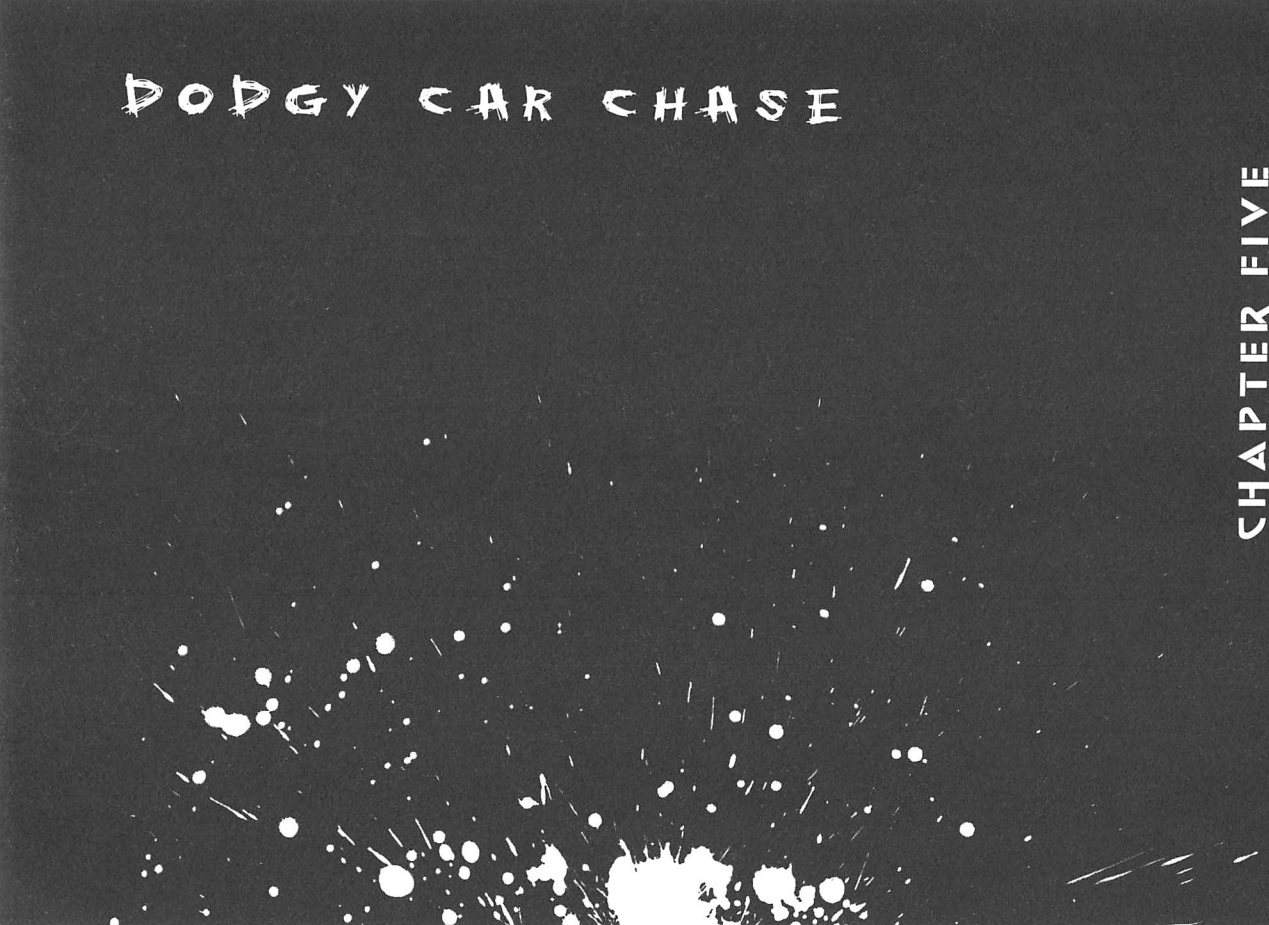
Saga wrinkled his face in disgust. Hanako looked surprised. She turned toward the doorway and smiled at the man who had accompanied her to the building.

"You were visiting Mr. Saga!"

"Yes. You saved my day. Now I need you, too," the man said. He gave her a smile; not the friendly one he had given her earlier. This one was much, much different.

DODGY CAR CHASE

CHAPTER FIVE



1

If Taki and Makie hurried, it would not take longer than ten minutes to get to Senzokuike from the Hospital in Yukigaya. In the car, after calling to get a Black Guard unit to take care of the patient's room, Taki slumped down in the seat. Just a five-minute rest. It would be a twenty-minute drive to Saga's apartment with traffic. He was almost certain the enemy had gotten to him. They had to move fast.

"Tendo, did you say? You mean Tendo Katsura?" asked Makie.

"That's right," Taki said, closing his eyes.

"The most feared sorcerer in the human world. I knew he was involved. Didn't you?"

"He went off the radar five years ago, after he failed to capture a wandering ghost at the Vancouver airport. He's one of the three most sought-after terrorists."

"He's got a son, hasn't he?"

"Yes, Tendo Ji. Another most wanted."

"Wow, what a nice family. So, they want Saga, I suppose?"

"Afraid so," Taki replied. He glanced at Makie, who looked as serene and beautiful as the moon, maneuvering the car. She looked distant, as if she were thinking of something far away. After a moment of silence, Makie said, "Someone's trailing us."

"Yeah, I saw them," Taki replied, glancing at the rearview mirror. Four cars were behind them.

"How many?"

"All four."

"They came fully prepared. We should be flattered."

"I really want to get this over with quickly," Taki said with a sigh.

"Do whatever you want. You traitor," Makie joked. Suddenly the Skyliner rocked violently.

Taki gripped the dash as the car came to rest. "What happened?"

"It's their Psy Power. Their cars are living organisms, each with the ability to amplify the occupant's Psy Power. This is bad. Innocent humans might get hurt."

Demonic Psychic Power worked differently from that

of humans. Its power could inflict bodily harm. It could burn, cut, freeze, and destroy living cells. Even stranger was that demons could change the genetic makeup of not only their victim but also the victim's entire family. Insert a drop of serial killer into a normal, happy family, for example.

A classic form of demonic torture was a phenomenon called Shadowless Syndrome. The demon would strip its prey of his shadow. The target would then spiral downward mentally until he perished. If the victim's friends visited him after a long absence, they would not be able to see him. The victim could scream at the top of his lungs and go completely unnoticed by his visitors. If the visitors noticed anything, it would only be a strange stain on the wall, shaped like their friend—the remainder of the shadow.

"Go around the back," Taki yelled, sliding his right hand beneath his armpit for his M29.

The car jerked again. This time a power pole received most of the Psy Power blast. It melted and transformed into a living organism in front of Taki's eyes.

With outstanding skill, Makie turned onto a side street. An elderly woman in the middle of the sidewalk jumped out of the way in surprise. Cursing the silver-gray automobile from behind, she noticed her arthritic back suddenly felt better.

Makie turned a few corners, randomly going right and left. Suddenly they found themselves in a big empty lot, surrounded by gray hills of rock. It was a gravel pit.

"Drop me off in the shadow of that hill. We'll separate and take them on," Taki said.

Makie complied without a word. She let him out and kept going, disappearing from his sight behind the next pebble hill.

The car, built using technology from the other world, barely made a sound. The vehicle's efficiency and Makie's driving skills astounded Taki. He pulled out his M29, flipped open the bottom flap of his ammo pouch, and took out thirty .44 Magnum bullets. Twelve were hollow-point antipersonnel bullets, and the other eighteen were armor-piercing, meant for big animals—like bears and buffalo, with thick muscles and layers of fat—and vehicles. The hollow-points were designed to inflict internal damage, so not ideal for robust targets. The armor-piercers went through a human body like it was a piece of paper.

Silent, Taki sent his Psy Power into each bullet and recharged his gleaming weapon. The bullets danced in his hand, in response to the magnetic force of the Psy Power. He had loaded the bullets with Psy Power before leaving the office; there was no real need for the additional power, but it made Taki feel better. A .44 Magnum, coupled with Taki's energy, could easily blow up this empty field, maybe even half of the Ota district.

The four cars appeared at the entrance of the field. Taki picked up a nasty vibe from every one of them. He grabbed the barrel of his gun. Ordinary-looking middle-aged men sat behind the wheels. None of them were ac-

tually from this side, he thought, or even individual organisms. The drivers were part of the cars themselves.

Taki switched off his presence. He knew what made those vehicle-shaped organisms so scary. It was not their power but their speed. They had superior agility, on top of supreme detection capability. They would quickly sniff out even the faintest scent of Psy Power coming from a Black Guard. Taki had seen some of his colleagues traumatized by the speed of the car-beings' tracking sensors.

A considerable amount of energy went into making them look like they were driven by humans. Taki peered at them; he could tell their voltage was pretty low.

Carefully, and with his presence snuffed out, he stuck the barrel of the M29 into the pebble mountain. They would not let him go alive. He wouldn't let them live either.

The cars moved soundlessly, clustered together casually. Perhaps they had done a quick search and decided either that there was no one here or that this battle would not last long.

The cars, bodies pulsing, shifted their forms constantly. Bumpers melted into gun muzzles. The glass in the windows was cloudy, with dark red lines running across it like veins. The tires were the strangest part, however. Like the bodies, they changed shape, losing their roundness and spawning thread-like tentacles which worked like tank treads to push the cars forward.

The cars split up at the entrance. One went right and one left. The other two moved forward, spreading into the lot.

What looked like a red Gloria went straight for the pebble mountain where Taki hid. When the car was within ten meters, Taki pulled the trigger.

Bam! The barrel jerked upward, sending pebbles flying. The .44 Magnum bullet, loaded with Psy Power, went straight into the nose of the Gloria, like a shaft of light brighter than the sun. It punched a big hole, causing as much damage as a bazooka. The car twitched. Its hood popped up, and its internal organs, whatever they were, flew into the air, then fell to earth. Gray smoke bellowed out of the car.

Bull's-eye.

Taki quickly ran down the pebble mountain. He charged into the field, muzzle up. The silver-gray Civic that had been running alongside the Gloria raced toward him.

Taki gripped his M29 with both hands and took aim. The hood popped up. It gaped at him like a vagina, spewing colorless, odorless energy.

Taki pulled the trigger. Two waves of Psy Power, one from Taki's bullet and one from the car, crashed into each other in midair. One went right through the other, and the Civic screamed in pain.

Brushing off some falling debris, Taki made a dash for the pebble mountain to his right. He caught a glimpse of the Civic, engulfed in black smoke. Two down, two left. There was no sign of the other cars, the ones that had gone right and left.

The left one, the Bluebird, was Makie's problem. A

woman's scream ripped through the air. It was Makie. For a split second, Taki let down his guard. Suddenly there was a blow to his chest and another to his right shoulder. A feeling of nausea assaulted his body, and he was flung backward.

Taki had fallen into their trap. His blood stopped flowing. He was momentarily deprived of oxygen. Then his reserve of energy, deep in his subconscious, gave him a kick.

Fighting off the lethargy that dragged at him, Taki picked himself up. Somewhere deep down, something was changing inside him.

The Bluebird peered over the top of a pebble mountain. Taki's grip on the M29 slipped, and his right hand dangled at his side. The bumper seemed to be smiling in triumph.

Taki came to his senses. His fingers moved toward his gun.

The car's door opened and fell off, tumbling down the hill, leaving a trail of gooey strings in its wake. The driver got out. Or half of him did. His back, buttocks, and thighs had all melted into the seat. The top half of the driver stretched out new appendages, but they looked nothing like the human legs he'd had. Instead, springy, thin, segmented legs, like an insect's, grew from the driver's torso and lifted him from the ground.

The driver's mouth opened wide. Taki saw something metal gleaming at the back of his mouth. He was not just for appearances. He was a weapon himself.

A Psychic Power amplifier.

The driver's gleaming green eyes were a sighting system, his drooping nose the sensor.

Taki raised his right hand. He was gathering all his power. He held up the barrel, but he did not have the strength to pull the trigger. He aimed the muzzle at the enemy's head, not sure what was going to happen if he couldn't take the shot.

A dark shadow appeared over the enemy. A second later, the Skyliner flew over the hill, crushing the Bluebird. The roof caved in and the car erupted in demonic guts.

The driver and the seat had been integrated—when the car was destroyed, so was the driver. He slumped to the ground. In that moment, Taki got back the power he needed.

His fingers tightened and the gun roared with fire. The bullet blasted away the driver's head. Taki wheezed in exhaustion, the weight of the M29 dragging his hand down.

The Skyliner spun its wheels in what remained of the dissolving Bluebird and ran down the hill. The door opened and Makie peered out.

"Get in now! One more to go."

"I can't move."

Cursing uncharacteristically, Makie leaped from the car and ran toward him, her Beretta M84 in her right hand. She quickly scanned the area, then took his arm to help him up.

"You made a mistake," Makie said accusingly.

"I heard your voice. You were in trouble."

"It was generated by them. Because you fell for it, I had to show myself."

"I'm sorry," Taki said with a weary sigh.

They got in the car. The second Makie closed the door, Taki let out a groan.

Makie bit back a whimper. Something horrible was happening around them. Everything was dissolving into illusion; only the physical landscape remained the same.

"Taki—"

The look of fear on her face forced Taki to act. He pressed his left hand into the dashboard. It sank to his wrist.

Which of us is the dream? Me or the car, Makie? Taki thought.

"No way . . ." Makie whispered.

Taki gave her a resigned nod. "The idiots have opened the pot. They released whatever was in the second layer. I'm turning into a dream."

A dark shadow fell across Makie's face as she watched him. The dark blue Nissan Cedric burst through the pebble hill and rushed toward them. Its windshield was cracked in a spiderweb pattern.

Taki yelled, "Watch out!"

Makie moved faster than Taki's words. She slammed the car into gear, and cut the wheel sharply to the left as she stamped on the accelerator. A blow came from behind, and Taki's body was flung into the door.

The car spun out of control, and Makie's body slammed into the wheel. A shining, shimmering dark ball of light appeared in the backseat. It sent out a feeler, which reached for Taki and Makie.

The enemy's Psy Power was assaulting them.

Makie threw back her head. The dark stuff pierced the seat, reaching for Makie. It crossed the gap between her and the seat, then penetrated her clothing and entered her anus.

She moaned. "Ooh . . ." The light moved slowly in and out of her.

Taki whirled around and waved his right hand through the dark light, which shattered and vanished, except for the beam that was fucking Makie's ass. Taki grabbed hold of it and tugged, with no effect.

Makie stepped on the accelerator. The engine revved.

"Give me a minute," Taki urged. With a big heave, he pulled the shaft of light from inside her. The dark light dispersed.

Taki aimed his M29 at the ball of dark energy that buzzed in the backseat and pulled the trigger. The invader winked out and was gone.

"You all right?"

"I'm fine."

Taki turned his face forward. Not a scratch on the windshield. "Eternal molecule? But that can only be created by fusing different living organisms. This car is alive."

"It's a part of my body," Makie said with a hint of arrogance, deftly maneuvering between the pebble hills. "The

automobile's memory bank contains all the functional units, from my genes to my personal Big Bang, including primary component elements. The car's functions are linked to my nervous system."

Taki turned around. The Cedric was right on top of them, peering into the rear window. Like the Skyline, it didn't have a scratch on it.

The Skyline wavered under another Psychic Power attack.

"There's no end to this, Taki. Let's kick it up to another level."

"Anything you say."

Makie rotated the Skyline in a big arc and headed toward an abandoned building fifty meters ahead. The car crashed through the building's door, sending dust flying. Makie showed no sign of slowing down and drove straight for a stairway on their right.

"Incredible," Taki said jokingly

"Quiet. Our lives are in the hands of this car."

The car ran up the steps smoothly, adjusting its tires to decrease bumps. Within seconds they were on the third floor. The car flew out of the stairwell, and Makie wrenched the steering wheel around. The moment the car landed, it whirled around to face the way they had come.

Is she trying to drive right into the enemy's stomach? Taki wondered.

The third floor was a concert hall. At the far end sat the stage. Its back wall was missing, revealing the blue sky outside.

For a second Taki and Makie were fooled. There was no sign of the Cedric. Not the roar of the engine or the squeal of brakes. The car had been right behind them on the second floor. Why hadn't it followed them up here?

Makie asked the question in a barely audible voice. "It went down to the basement, you think?"

"Yeah—waiting for us. The last man standing. Very clever, that one. Torpedo versus submarine."

"What kind of torpedoes have they got? This submarine's got explosives," Makie said.

"We have to move fast," Taki said. "We have no time to lose."

"Got it," Makie said calmly. She slammed her foot on the accelerator. Her other foot was still on the brake, though, and the Skyline's rear end slid back and forth across the floor, smoke billowing from the tires.

We have to be prepared for everything. That's how we're going to get through this, Taki said to himself.

The enemy must have heard them, for the ground suddenly bubbled up in front of them.

A searing pain tore through Taki's whole body. It was Makie's tension, transferring into the car. *Don't touch the car*, Taki reminded himself. *This car is part of Makie.*

The Skyline finally came to rest.

Taki slid out the clip of his M29 and installed a fresh magazine. He released some Psy Power into it.

The hard concrete floor continued to churn and bubble. Bumps of various sizes erupted around the Skyline. Part of the floor pushed upward. Bricks of concrete

floated into the air around a dirty yellowish bubble that looked like a drop of oil floating on the surface of water.

"What is that?" Makie said.

"Torpedoes aren't the only thing we're up against," Taki replied. He recognized the floating bomb— a buoyant mine. He had heard of them but never seen one. It might as well have been a torpedo, considering the damage its impact might do. He couldn't be sure how powerful it was. A part of him was itching to see how the mine worked in battle.

"Don't move," Makie whispered. "An increase in body temperature, a sound, or a change of airflow can all give away our location. The car's exterior will cover for us, but we can't take chances. If he finds us, we're toast." Makie gave Taki a serious look, and Taki grinned at her.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Where did you learn that phrase? We're toast."

"I found it in the colloquial dictionary."

"Well, the editor should be crucified," Taki laughed.

Makie narrowed her eyes and smirked. Her expression changed to one of seriousness. "Shh. He's coming." She slowly turned toward the window on her right.

A strange thing crept up from below. Something that looked vaguely like the Cedric emerged. It wasn't a car, though. It was a living machine. A weapon.

Makie's eyes flashed caution when she noticed its unworldly composition. "No wonder he's survived. He's a special fighting machine."

Eyes still front, Taki gestured toward the hole in the floor, which was about three meters in diameter.

"I'm not sure how powerful that bubble is. It'll definitely last for a few seconds. I'll handle the demon. Once the buoyant mine blows, it will open a hole into eldritch space. We can lure that thing inside and shut it up tight."

The machine crawled back to the floor, its tentacles gripping the wall. It moved extremely slowly, as if to show confidence. A crack ran down the middle of the car, exposing hundreds of round bumps.

Taki figured the bumps must be weapons of some kind. "Why is it moving so slowly?"

Makie kept her eyes on the Cedric. "Because it's back in its original shape. It's covered in armor, which makes it move about ten times slower than this Skyline."

"Do you think my PP can blast it off?" Taki asked.

"I'd say fifty-fifty."

Taki gave a small nod to Makie. As if in reply, the Skyline convulsed. Taki smashed a hole in the window with the butt of his gun.

The bumps detached from the Cedric's back and hurtled toward them. They were mines, and they came at Makie and Taki from all directions. Taki's .44 Magnum spat out a bullet, and the Psy Power guided it though the balls. A flash of white appeared at the front of the demon machine. The bullet had hit a barrier, invisible armor that covered the Cedric's entire body like a film of water.

Without shooting a second bullet, Taki blocked the hole in the window with his left hand.

The Skyline surged forward with an amazing velocity. Darkness closed in on them.

The skin of his left hand got sucked out of the window by tremendous force. Taki focused as much of his Psy Power as he could into the exposed part of his hand.

The Skyline backed down. They pierced the buoyant mine. It blew a hole in the bridge between human and alien space. The hole wasn't very big; definitely smaller than the Skyline. Taki knew that when an object is sucked through a hole smaller than it is, it becomes compressed to the size of the hole by the force of the rigid borders of the space. It was called a Black Hole maker.

Two seconds—that was how long the Skyline and Makie could survive like that. Taki concentrated his Psy Power on the hole in the window, pushing their existence outward, so it would not be fully absorbed by the space.

The Skyline's engine barked. The car tried to move forward, pushing back against the suction of the hole. It was like a fish fighting against a tsunami.

It felt like an eternity, Taki thought. Time seemed to have slowed down as they approached the hole. His hand looked like it was going to be cut out in the shape of the hole in the window.

The machine that was Makie shrieked in agony.

One one-thousand . . .

Two one-thousand . . .

Three one-thousand . . .

There was a flash, and then silence. It was still dark all around, but Taki knew they had won. The Cedric had

been absorbed by the eldritch space. It was still open, but collapsing quickly.

"We have to go, now!" Taki pulled his hand inside as the Skyline squealed its wheels and dropped through the hole in the floor, gliding down to the second level.

There was no floor underneath.

The car fell, chunks of concrete grazing the Skyline as they were sucked upward toward the closing eldritch space. Finally, they landed on the first level, the Skyline surviving the two-floor drop, the impact softened by the car's exterior buffer layer.

The entrance to the alien space was detaching itself from the outer world. The building wouldn't survive.

Makie punched the accelerator, and the Skyline hit top speed.

"Don't pause. Keep going!" Taki turned around, shouting. They shot out of the door, and a second later the whole building, now just piles of rubble, was sucked into the hole. Taki had never seen a building, part of its beams bared, vanish in a heartbeat.

"In the mood for a tea?" Makie said.

Taki was surprised that Makie's breathing was normal. It was as if nothing had happened.

"It's gone, I think," he said.

"You think your Psy Power worked?"

"Some of it. The rest was all luck."

Makie had a smile on her face. The car picked up speed, and their backs were slammed against the seats.

2

"WHAT DO you want from me?" Saga asked.

The man in the dark gray suit smiled again at Hanako, who seemed so wholesome and vulnerable.

"Do you want to help your little friend here?" The man's eyes bore into the gaze of Saga Miyuki. They weren't smiling; they were the eyes of an animal sizing up its prey. "All you have to do is come with me."

"Who the hell are you?" Fear was palpable in Saga's voice. Part of him was already looking for a way out. He didn't want a confrontation. The moment he had decided to skip town, his spirit had crumbled. All he wanted was to run and never look back.

"My name is Tendo Ji. Nice to meet you."

"That's a funny name. What's your family name? Tendo or Ten?" Hanako laughed and pouted. She was clueless about what was going on, but her instinct told her that this man was unwelcome here, and she couldn't leave Saga alone.

"Tendo Ji," the young man replied, punctuating every syllable. A nasty smile curved his lips as he returned his attention to Saga. "Why are you scared? I've come to see the Dream Guard, not a drunkard. Or is this what you really are?"

"Ever heard of knocking? And you have no right to

talk to him like that!" Hanako stood up, furious. "Get out."

"Sure, I'll do that. I'm leaving with Mr. Saga here. You want to come, too?" Tendo Ji asked, almost sweetly.

"Don't. Leave her out of this," Saga pleaded.

"Okay. Then come with me."

A little hesitation. A sheen of sweat formed on Saga's forehead.

"Have it your way." Tendo Ji reached for Hanako, and then stopped. Something wasn't right. He turned around. A man stood at the end of the hallway, near the stairs. He carried an attaché case. Ji recognized him—Nakagiri, the employee in charge of the Senzokuike Ward at Raisu Electronics. Of course he was not a salesperson. He was Black Guard.

Ji clenched his fist and swung it at Nakagiri, as if trying to hit him from the top of the stairs. It seemed like nothing happened, but there was a movement as something zipped through the air.

Nakagiri raised his right hand, blocking Ji's Psy Power attack. Then he waved his hand, as if he were saying hi to a friend. A fireball of Psy Power flew up the stairs at Ji. Ji sliced it in half with his hand, scattering it.

Black Guard versus Demonic Wizard. The battle had begun.

Nakagiri stepped back, cautious, when Ji's hands went inside his suit jacket. He pulled them out, holding two whips. They wiggled and had thin red threads on the end that darted in and out like a tongue.

Snakes? No. They looked and moved like snakes, but these were an entirely different life form from the other world. Covered in granular skin, they flicked their not one but *three* thin tongues in and out of their mouths. Ji must have had them wrapped around his chest beneath his suit, like pets.

In his mind, Nakagiri flipped through the biology textbook of the Black Guard. Most animals from the other side could inhabit the human world. To be used to their fullest extent, however, they needed processing. They had to look familiar to the humans. Like those two snake-like creatures.

Nakagiri ran through the names of some in his mind—Vectz Siluri, Shabenugu, Leavi. Ah, those repulsive, modified forms. But he could not place Ji's hissing critters. Didn't matter. First things first—he had to chase the wizard away from Saga's room.

Ji swung the living whip sideways. Nakagiri's body flew backward. Just before he hit the floor, he flipped in the air and landed on the ground. A torn piece of fabric fluttered to the floor—a piece of Nakagiri's suit jacket that had been cut off by a Psychic Power blow. The whips were equipped with a PP amplifier.

"Wow," Tendo Ji said, impressed. "You're good. I have to give you credit."

He referred to the white mist that lay on the surface of Nakagiri's attaché case. He had used it as a shield, and the case had received most of the blow.

Tendo Ji nodded as he came down the hall toward the

Guard. "I take it you have an amplifier circuit built in? Let's see how long you can keep that up." With that, a shaft of brownish light sparked from his hands.

Nakagiri jumped upward. He dodged the first whip, which tried to lick his groin, and received the second blow with his case. He lost his balance, but on the way down he aimed a kick at Ji's face. The momentum gave his Psy Power an edge.

Ji threw back his head to dodge the blow, and Nakagiri's foot shattered his left collarbone. The pain was bearable, but the Psy Power of the Black Guard that raced through his body almost did him in. Ji twisted around, in agony, and fell to the ground.

Nakagiri flew up for one last strike. His amplifier circuit was powered to the full output. He was about to bring his foot down when he froze in the air.

The young girl, Hanako, moved into Ji's waiting arms, a top spinning in reverse. While Ji had been down, one of the whips had slithered back into the room, taken Hanako, and brought her to its master.

All Black Guards go through brutal training in order to harden their hearts. Ancient wise men knew that weak minds were easier to mesmerize. Evil would get into their heads, finding their fears, reading their minds so they could transform themselves into their loved ones. So many great Black Guards had fallen prey to the psychological manipulations of demons.

Sometimes what you love can kill you. Cruel but true.

Anger, sorrow, hate, and love. Emotions have to be forgotten during a battle, and Black Guards are trained to block them out. Sometimes they have to kill their own family members, possessed by demons. Then they move on and keep fighting to save the world. That is what Black Guards do.

Their state of mind could be updated within a one-thousandth part of a second. Nakagiri slipped, for a millisecond. He thought Hanako looked exactly like his lover back in his hometown of Tokushima. His heart had not been hardened enough. Or maybe it was just that Ji and his snake pets were too good.

It was a trap. While Nakagiri hesitated, the other whip crept up behind him. It pierced his skull and went right into his brain. When the realization hit him, it sent shivers down his spine. The young Black Guard died instantly.

"Ah, well. If he had come a minute later, he would have lived." Tendo Ji stood, shaking his head, which throbbed lightly. His god-given beauty was distorted with anger and the humiliation of almost getting defeated.

Hanako felt her blood turn cold at the sight of the piercing eyes that bored into hers. No, she was too numb to feel anything. Her mind was floating somewhere.

"Don't move!" Ji shouted at Saga, who had bolted out the door. "Forget it. He's dead. If you don't want her dead, come with me. Hell, why wait? Now that the guards are on the move, we can't afford to hide. You're going to die right here," Tendo Ji said.

"Let her go," Saga demanded.

"When I'm finished with you."

"Ah!" Hanako threw back her head, moaning. Saga scanned her body to find out what had happened and saw one of the whips going through her open zipper. The snake had found its way inside Hanako, an innocent girl. The three tongues slithered out of its mouth and stroked the most sensitive part of her body. All her senses were heightened at the hand of the demonic tormentor. Hanako shivered in disgust, but her body betrayed her as her vagina turned wet and slick.

She was going mad. A virgin, being raped by a snake. The caressing tongues felt so good it made her forget the humiliation and fear, and she moaned again, this time with pleasure. Her vaginal juices streaked down her inner thighs. Snakes love the moist and hot cave of flesh as much as men do. It wriggled deeper inside her and met with the barrier that told it she was a virgin. This was even better than it had hoped.

The snake opened its mouth agape and sank its teeth into the soft membrane of her hymen. Saga made a dash for Hanako as she moaned and trembled. The whip that had killed Nakagiri wrapped around his chest with a whoosh.

"Why are you not fighting?" Tendo Ji said, confused. "I so wanted to see what the Dream Guard had to offer. Well, we don't have enough time for this. So, here we go. 'Bye."

Something exploded inside Saga's body. There was no sound, no heat, and no spark as Psy Power blew through him. For a second, Saga's body dried up and blood burst out of his nostrils. He slumped over without a whimper.

"My, my. You know how much Psy Power I have just put into you? The whips are screaming in pain," Ji noted in an amused voice. "Let's see how long you can hold out. Like this young lady over here."

Hanako threw back her head again. Tears flowed down her cheeks. "Mr. Saga . . ." Hanako called his name. She only had the inadequate drunkard to call.

But was he really inadequate? Saga lifted his face the moment her voice reached his ears. The whip that bound his arms and legs blasted away.

"You—" Complete shock shook Tendo Ji's brain. He recovered and swiftly attempted to bring Hanako closer to him. The other whip let Hanako go and suddenly wrapped itself around Ji's neck, baring its teeth. Ji tore it off and used it harshly on Saga.

The Dream Guard did not put up a fight. His body was smashed into pieces instantly.

"Ha. I should have done that sooner. Dream Guard, my ass," Ji muttered, relieved. He looked down at all that remained of Saga—his feet. Ji's hair stood on end as he watched the stubs of Saga's feet. He heard the sound of footfalls, coming closer.

A face grew from the stubs. A rugged face with a thick stubble of beard. Saga's smiling face.

"Impossible!"

One of Ji's whips licked his face. "Had your fun?" the whip asked Tendo Ji. There was a face attached to the end of the whip. Saga's face. Ji desperately flailed the whip away, angry.

Saga's face was smashed into the wall. "Whoa. That was a good one, Ji," Saga said. "But you're not in your father's league." Faces grew from the wall where Ji had whipped it, every one Saga's face. They all spoke at once.

The whip lay lifeless. In a heartbeat, Ji jumped to Hanako's side and wrapped his arm around her pale thin neck.

"The fun's over! You want to hear her head snapped off?"

"Whose head?" Hanako's voice asked weakly. In the gripping embrace, her head took a 180-degree turn and stared into Ji's eyes.

It was Saga's face.

Tendo Ji took a step back, face white as a sheet. This was a nightmare. He had never seen the real power of the Dream Guard. He tried to run, but both legs sank into the ground, as if he had stepped in quicksand. He looked down.

Huge lips were swallowing his legs.

"Where are you going?" Saga asked, just before Ji's legs were bitten off below the knee.

Ji writhed about in unspeakable pain. His vision turned crimson, but he still was able to see a pair of gigantic nos-

trils bulging out of the ground, just above where his legs had disappeared. Above the nose, eyelids fluttered open and Saga's enormous eyes looked at him. His face was filling the floor of the hallway.

Ji crawled toward the stairs, leaving a bloody trail behind him.

"Nope, nowhere near your father," Saga taunted. "It's sad, really."

Saga's scornful laughter burned into Ji's back as he climbed down the stairs on the stumps of his legs. Saga, whole again, ran to Hanako, who lay on the ground. Tendo Ji would never believe it, but Saga had not moved since Ji first attacked him. Tendo Ji's near-death experience had all happened in dream space.

"Hanako!" Saga called her name and shook her. She opened her eyes a little. A look of horror swept over her face, and Saga covered her face with his hand.

"Sleep and forget everything that happened here." He would erase the horrible memory from her mind. For him it was as easy as breathing.

Suddenly the hair on the back of Saga's neck stood at attention. Saga felt it—the eldritch vibe. It was spreading into the world. It made his skin crawl, and he quickly put up a rigid shield of Psy Power to protect them. And none too soon, for it shook heavily almost as soon as it was erected.

The hall began to change around them. A gigantic jaw attacked, trying to gobble them up. Chaos ran amok. The

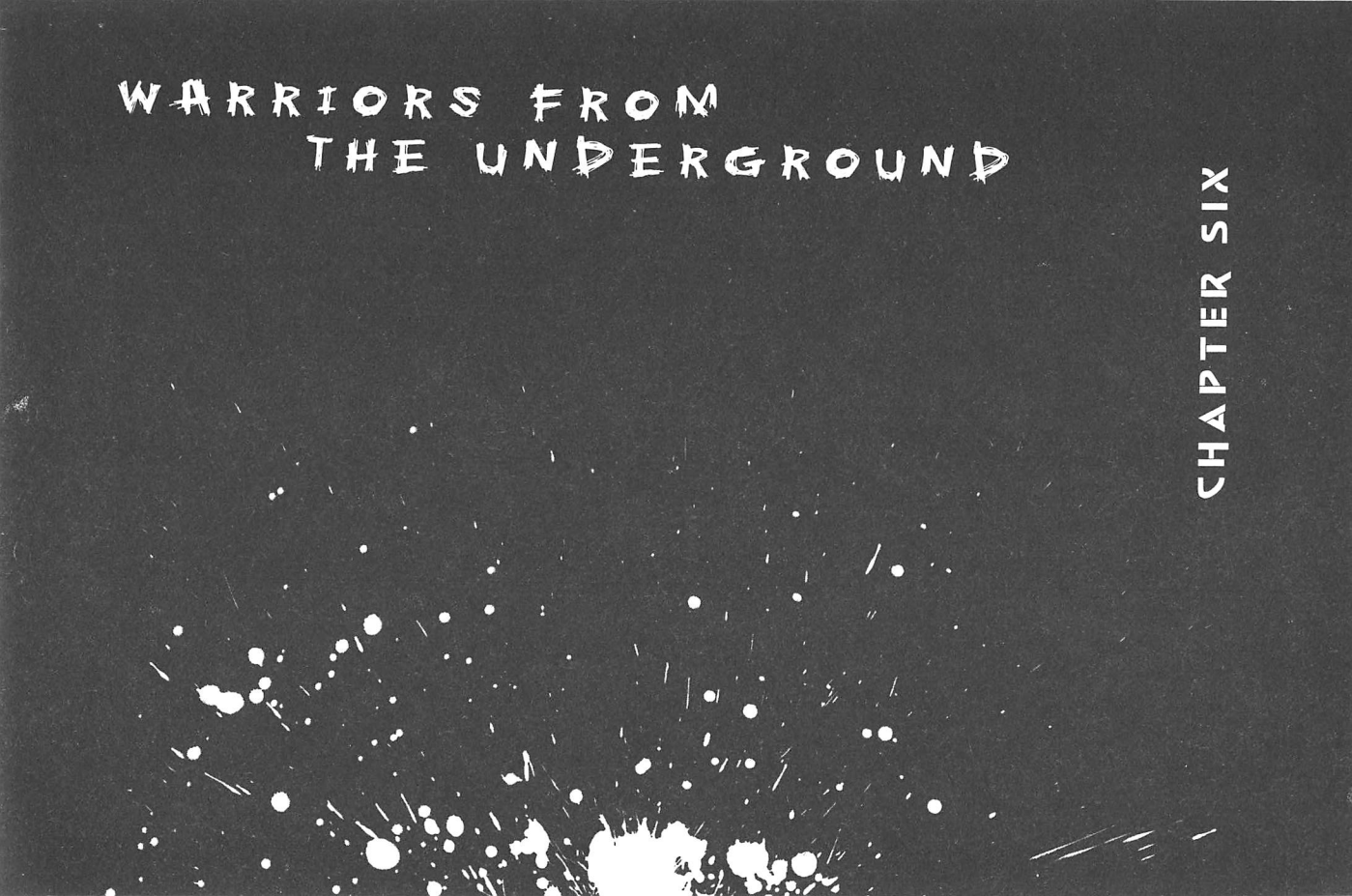
floor and the ceiling and everything else lost substance and started spinning.

"They opened the second layer . . . Bastards."

The world roared, caught in a dream. Saga's mumbling turned into a squeak and flowed away.

WARRIORS FROM THE UNDERGROUND

CHAPTER SIX



1

As Saga was carrying Hanako back into his room, Taki and Makie appeared at the top of the stairs.

A quick look at Nakagiri's body, and the eldritch air floating around the hall, told Taki what had happened.

"Is she all right?" Taki asked, pointing at Hanako.

"Yeah." Saga's voice came out hoarse. "But he's dead. I'm sorry about that."

"I'll get the unit," Makie said and took off down the stairs in a hurry.

Taki lifted Nakagiri's body off the floor and passed through the door. "Who was it?"

"Tendo Ji. I had the son, so I suppose you had the father?" Saga asked. He placed his hand over Hanako's forehead as she slept peacefully.

"Yes. I politely asked him to leave," Taki said. He placed Nakagiri's body on the floor and sat on the futon. "The Tendo clan—they've made their names known during the past five years. Now they're public enemy number three and number five."

"Quick up the ladder, eh?" Saga said matter-of-factly.

"Oh, sure, you know how it is." Taki's face turned serious. "So you took Ji out?"

"No. He got away."

"He'll be back for you."

"Why?"

"You're the Dream Guard, Saga Miyuki. You're worth the trouble."

Saga removed his hand from Hanako's head. "Done. Her memories are completely erased. Can you take her to headquarters and give her proper treatment? I think she's fine. But you never know."

"I'll have them take her when the unit arrives."

Saga gave a relieved sigh. As usual, it reeked of alcohol.

"You sensed something?" Taki asked after a moment.

"Yeah. The grudge made an appearance. Part of the second layer. I chased it away. It seems to home in on those with strong Psy Power."

"Do you think they've figured out how to break the seal on the pot?" Taki wondered aloud.

"No, I don't think so. They're looking to unleash the big boy. Why go slow?"

"Then they miscalculated. Clumsy sons of bitches," Taki cursed.

Saga had a worried look on his face. "So . . . how are you? I can tell, you know, what happened to you. What's still happening."

Taki shrugged. "Just like the song says—it feels duller than when it happened. The problem is it's getting hard to be able to touch things."

"What about that woman?" He pointed toward the door with his chin, indicating Makie.

"She's fine. She's one of us. Just so you know," Taki said.

"I know. Hell, all kinds of funny things are starting to happen, so why not?"

Taki nodded. "On our way here, I got a call from headquarters. More and more people and things are turning into dreams. In New York, three hundred people sank through the floor of the Empire State Building observation deck and fell to the first floor."

"Spirits love that place. Any women impregnated yet?"

"About that." Taki tapped his forehead with his finger. "Six in the Southern Hemisphere and twelve in the Northern gave birth to dream babies. They turned their mothers and doctors into dreams the moment they drew their first breaths. They're trying to erase the whole world. We managed to imprison them in eldritch spaces. Kenya

is short on hands and materials, though, so we sent some help from Tunisia and Israel. Anyway, they're increasing in number."

Saga avoided making eye contact with Taki, who was trying to stare him down. "Stop it. It's out of my hands."

"Still, you chased away the grudge of the second layer. You're stronger than me."

"That was as far as I could go. I'll be helpless when they pop the third layer."

"Well, next it's the beast itself," Taki noted.

There was a light knock. Saga gave permission, and Makie entered.

"How are things at headquarters?" Saga asked.

Makie gave a graceful nod. "It's getting worse. The Charles de Gaulle International Airport has transformed into dream, and four jumbo jets exploded as they came in for a landing. Body count is nearly two thousand. Twenty murders occurred in Tokyo, and every one of the killers thought their lovers or partners were monsters. This is only the beginning."

"Entertaining, isn't it?" Saga spat out, his head turned away.

"Not at all. How does it feel to stand here and do nothing, turning your back on what is happening out there?" Makie said.

Saga stood, shaking with anger.

"Stop it, Makie," Taki said.

Makie turned on Taki. "Why don't you tell him off,

instead of me? Why are we wasting our time babysitting him? He's our only hope, and all he does is drink and wallow in his misery. He saved that girl's life, and the world is still coming to an end." She spun toward Saga, her pale face flushed. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself and go out there and fight."

Saga's beet red face turned white. "I'm leaving here before the unit arrives. Take care of Hanako."

Saga picked up his battered suitcase and made his way toward the door, but Makie blocked his exit.

"We need you."

"Move," Saga ordered.

"Makie—" Taki tried to cut in. Saga's shoulder cracked as he reached out to push Makie aside. Without his even touching her, Makie slammed into the door and tumbled to the floor, chips of old plaster crumbling around her.

Two people with powerful Psy Power had crashed into each other.

"Saga, wait."

Saga turned around to face Taki and received a heavy blow to his jaw. He fell head first into the sink near the door.

"Sorry about that. Are you all right?" Taki asked, helping Saga up. Saga saw Taki's hands.

"You lied to me. You're not entirely dream yet." He shifted his gaze to Makie. She sat on the floor, shaking her muddled head.

"Pick her up, will you? She's too good for you," Saga said.

"Don't you get it?" Taki suddenly raised his voice, furious. "I have to stop this thing, not Makie."

"Can a dream use Psy Power?"

"I punched you, didn't I? I'll get by."

"Well, who knows?" Saga said, leaning his back against the kitchen counter. "Anything's possible in a dream world, right?" He pulled a whisky bottle from his pocket. He lifted it to his lips slowly, as if he were thinking. What he said next shocked Taki like a blow.

"I fought an incubus once," Saga said. He turned away, still holding the bottle.

Makie turned to look at him, looking more stunned than Taki.

Saga only stared ahead. "It was six months before I quit. I was flying to Kerala, India. You remember?"

Taki nodded. He had always had a notion that Saga's trip to India had something to do with his sudden resignation. Taki had been assigned to the European General Directorate at the time and missed the chance to talk to him.

"It happened on the plane."

Taki helped Makie sit up, then looked up at his former partner as he continued to speak, not even bothering to wipe the drops of whisky off his beard.

Saga remembered as if it happened yesterday. Twelve hundred meters above the Indian Ocean, he had nodded off. He had dreamed. When he opened his eyes, an English woman sat next to him, screaming. Saga's head had

turned into a red skull, his skin drawn tight against the bone. Sticky liquid dripped from his jaw onto his knees. His blood. It spurted from every pore on his face.

"I was sent to a hospital as soon as the plane arrived at the airport. I was isolated from other patients. Nobody could figure out what happened. But I knew. It was one of the beasts. A dream rapist. Nobody else knows about our battle. I was only in the dream for a few seconds, and that's what happened."

Saga finished and was quiet. Then he started to shake. Black dots appeared on his forehead, cheeks, and eyelids. The dots bubbled, and liquid streaked down his face.

"You haven't seen the color of my blood before, have you?" Saga asked. "Just thinking about that day does this to me. Every pore on my body spouts blood. The beast changed it. It's black. What can I do? I went to the Hospital yesterday because I knew it was the grudge and not the beast itself."

Saga staggered toward the door, and Taki and Makie stepped aside for him.

"I'm sorry about that, sweetheart," Saga apologized to Makie.

"Don't worry about it. I've had worse. Listen, we still need you," Makie said.

Saga raised his hand. That was a good-bye. "It's good to be free."

Taki and Makie silently watched the stooped back of the beaten man walk down the stairs and away.

His voice called from below. "The pot. It's in the Hibiya subway, the Tendo boys' playground. Somewhere between Ginza and Hibiya."

The witch waited for the thundering vibration to pass and then glared at the two dark shadows in front of her. They were in the middle of the bleak room with the bare orange bulb dangling from the ceiling. More dark shadows huddled behind them, as if keeping them in. The light was not on them.

"You screwed up, Tendo."

The woman spoke without a trace of anger in her voice. It was an elderly woman's voice, and yet the shadows stiffened with tension, as if they feared the woman.

"Not only did you not kill them, someone's following Ji."

"Can't be. We were very careful," said the bigger shadow nervously.

"You thought you were. But you weren't careful enough. Do you know where you are right now?" the woman asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Katsura. You?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Your son's dreaming with his eyes open. The Dream Guard pulled him into a dream, and he didn't even have the strength to put him to sleep, the fool. They will get to him in his dream. In the dream, there is no savior's gate, no iron wall or electronic barrier." She turned to the larger

shadow. "You shouldn't have gone there alone. You underestimated the Dream Guard. He's a real threat."

The rest of the shadows behind them shifted, restless.

"Normally I would be glad to make you suffer a death more dire than Prometheus's. But this is not a good time. Just remember that your lives depend on this battle. Give all you have and kill them all."

"Yes, ma'am."

The two shadows gave a deep bow. The smaller one spoke. "Ji, my son. You say he's in a dream. That might be to our advantage. He will draw them to him. Unless you'd rather I ended him here and now."

The woman smiled. "Do it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Their voices were surprisingly calm, despite the content of the conversation. One might assume that they were bad actors studying lines. But if it had been a play, the well-built shadow wouldn't have sat still while his father got behind him and wrapped his arm around his son's thick neck.

The darkness grew ominous. "That's enough," the woman's voice ordered. "It's too late, anyway. They're onto him. Your first idea was better. We can use him as bait."

"Oh, yes. That sounds like a great idea." Unbelievably, it was Ji who spoke.

After the Tendo clan left, the witch's evil laughter resonated around the room. It seemed to go on forever in the brooding darkness.

"It's showtime. Can you stop me from freeing the third layer, Dream Guard?"

2

ANYONE WHO has meddled with the occult or witchcraft will tell you that ghouls' hangouts—places where ghosts live—exist. If you were to ask for an example of what one looks like, the person would pause, think, and soon come up with an answer: the subway. Not the basement of an abandoned building, or an abandoned, run-down house with a history of inexplicable deaths, or even a cemetery. The subway. The subway is an urban transport system, a celebration of modern technology and architecture. It is a work of cutting-edge technology, the symbol of a megalopolis. It is also a hotbed of demons.

Where else would demons like to live but a murky, man-made hole that runs deep into the ground, where the only light is provided by strands of flimsy wire and the sun never reaches. Dark and empty, except for a few unarmed patrols on duty. No police. It is a lawless world, and the perfect place for demons to cause havoc, because it also comes with an unlimited supply of power. Dig a little deeper, and there is even water to drink.

Food? The subway is a land of plenty. Food walks willingly into the subway, night and day. Most people don't notice, but a few waiting passengers, standing near the edge of the platform, vanish into thin air before the

train arrives. Every year seventy people within Tokyo's twenty-three wards go missing. Another nine thousand in L.A., ninety thousand in Chicago, and twelve thousand in New York. If people are upset over the disappearances, they think it is the work of human predators. No one has ever noticed a dark shadow creeping up behind the victim, its claws pressing the mouth closed, or a claw or a knife slashing the throat, choking the scream, then carrying the bloody body away. Lurking in the impenetrable darkness, the ghouls wait for victims to walk into their traps, always hungry for them.

An afternoon train had been derailed in Hibiya, near the Ginza station. Several underground stations were forced to stop all services indefinitely. Station clerks announced route changes over a public address system as a group of people, all dressed in white, like medical personnel, rushed into the subway. Passengers cursed their bad luck and headed back to the access way, not realizing that today was the luckiest day of their lives.

Taki and Makie had been walking for some time in the dim station, lit only by strings of lamps. Three shadows trailed them in silence. One in a suit, one in a leather jacket, and one in a wool coat. They walked right behind Taki and Makie, but the two did not seem disturbed by their presence. They were some of the Black Guard based in Tokyo. One was a demon, the other two human. All of them were armed.

"Just five of us . . . Not very comforting," Taki mumbled. He held tightly to an Ingram MAC-11 and a 9 mm submachine gun that featured a twenty-round magazine.

Makie coldly told him to man up. The demonic guard, named Miyake, had an M16A2, the standard-issue rifle of the U.S. military. Tanna, the human male guard, carried a flamethrower, while Segawa Norie, the female guard, had an 84 mm Carl Gustav recoilless rifle.

Makie continued. "Headquarters is going crazy, with this world turning into dream business. Three is the best they could do."

"What about this underground debacle? Have they come up with something?" Miyake asked. "Or will we be run over soon?"

"No worries. The train service won't be restored today," Taki assured him. "They've made it look real. Derailed train, paramedics, ambulances, hospitals and beds, medicines, doctors and nurses. They're all real, except for the injured citizens and their families. The board's got a lot of explaining to do to the press. It's a media frenzy. That's real, too."

"I hope we get through this alive," Segawa Norie said, a twinkle in her eye. Norie was thirty-seven years old with a husband and two children, each with above-average Psy Power. Her children went to a training center outside school to learn how to access their untapped power. This was her first real mission in a long time, and she was ready for some action.

Taki stopped, as if he were reading the air itself. "It's time. Get ready."

Everyone's faces hardened. They were standing somewhere between Ginza and Hibiya. If Saga was being honest with them, the pot should be close.

Miyake and Norie went across the tracks to the other side and trooped forward, hands tracing the wall. Taki and Tanna stayed where they were, as did Makie, and cast a searching beam of Psy Power for any sign of demonic activity.

Makie turned around and looked at Taki. "Are you all right?"

"For now, yes, I'm fine. I've got this, remember?" Taki replied, lifting his MAC-11 in the air. Thanks to the grudge hiding in the second layer of the pot, Taki was turning into a dream. His extremely high Psychic Power allowed him to hold his weapon, but the problem was what to do with it. He was becoming less of the real world by the minute. He waved his hand at Makie. "Please don't worry about me. It's Saga that we have to worry about."

"You mean the beast he battled on the plane?"

Taki nodded. "I had someone look into that before I came here. I was right. No beast has been sighted for centuries. I don't think they would lie to Saga about it. What would be the point? The only possible answer is that headquarters didn't realize what had happened."

"Or ignored it," Makie said.

"Which do you think is more plausible?"

"I don't know."

Two shafts of light brought the conversation to a halt. A ball of powerful Psy Power swept down the tunnel past them, burning their faces. Behind it appeared two big shining eyes—headlights.

"That's him. The last one," Taki muttered, his voice barely audible. It was the fourth car that had attacked him and Makie at the construction site. The Cedric had broken out of the eldritch space. Taki never expected to see it again at all, let alone in the subway.

Vroom! Its engine roared to life. The two eyes closed in on the guards.

Taki fired his weapons. The 9 mm sprayed eight hundred bullets per minute, the MAC-11, eleven hundred. With one squeeze of the triggers, the eyes in the tunnel were smashed and the lights blinked out in a hail of broken glass.

"Get down!" Miyake yelled. Taki and Makie flattened themselves against the wall as the banged-up Cedric sped by, wind whipping Makie's cheek. The car went another ten meters and screeched to a halt before spinning around on the spot. The engine let out a howl.

"Leave it to me!" Segawa Norie cried. She bolted into the middle of the tracks and pointed her 84 mm Carl Gustav at the car. She wore a green wool coat she had purchased on sale at a local clothing store. It was an odd pairing—an ordinary housewife holding a bazooka.

Tanna followed her. He took some ammo from his shoulder bag, pulled off the Venturi that covered the end

of the launcher tube and loaded it, then replaced the nozzle. Tanna tapped Norie's shoulder, signaling everything was ready. She squeezed the trigger, and pressure popped the Venturi, which spat out smoke and the empty shell as the Carl Gustav blasted fire. The rocket was powerful enough to blow away a heavy tank from five hundred meters. It went right into the Cedric's face.

Fire engulfed the car. The hood popped up and some shapeless, slimy jelly—it could have come from either a human or a beast—flew into the air. It dropped and disappeared. Already weakened by the damage that Taki's .44 Magnum, laden with his Psy Power, had done, the Cedric was quiet.

"It's there. The entrance is over there!" Taki yelled.

The rest turned around to find a long crack on the wall in one corner.

"Our Psychic Power blew through here. I can feel this is the right place. Let's go through one by one," Taki said, pointing to the crack. "They know we're here. Follow me, and don't drop your guard!" With that, Taki let his body slip into the darkness.

A vast space welcomed him, about five meters high and twenty wide. Tubes ran across the ceiling. How the demons had managed to dig this cave, with walls sturdy enough to withstand the constant vibrations of the trains, Taki had no idea. There was a prefab building on each side of the space. One was small, almost like a cottage. The other was a storehouse. Both were dimly lit.

In the next instant, a barrage of weirdly shaped wooden

machines surrounded the Black Guard. The air churned with eldritch energy. Some of the machines noticed Taki's presence and scattered, their bodies bent. There was no place to hide.

"Norie, load a rocket into your bazooka and wait here. The rest of you with me," Taki said, charging into the room.

A black shadow suddenly jumped in front of him. Its mouth was open wide, rancid breath blowing over Taki and the others. Yellow teeth glinted from the cave-like mouth. Before its claws could reach him, a bullet from his MAC-11 hit the monster's temple. Gray matter spewed from its nose.

One down. Taki found himself surrounded by creatures with green eyes crawling out of nowhere. "Stay back."

Tanna came forward with the flamethrower and pulled the trigger. The muzzle belched white phosphorus fire, lit by the napalm igniters. The flame grew to a ten-meter tongue of fire. Tanna brought down the muzzle, letting the flames lick the floor.

The demons turned into living torches. Black smoke and the stink of burning fat filled the area.

Taki heard a rhythmical firing nearby. Makie and Miyake had caught up with them and were firing into the crowd. The demons fell one after another, guts spilling out and fragments of flesh flying. Suddenly a very strong wave of Psychic Power assaulted them, and Taki and the others nearly lost their balance. Complete darkness.

When the light returned, a very strange sight met their eyes. It was a hulking wooden structure that resembled a tank, but it had been designed and built with a complete disregard for the physical laws of the human world. Tendo Katsura stood on top of the tank. His hand was on the central pillar, where a human would open the hatch and enter. What captured the attention of the five Black Guards was the human face that appeared to be part of the pillar itself. The face bore a remarkable resemblance to Katsura.

"Tendo, you . . . you turned your son into a machine?" Taki said in disgust, gritting his teeth.

Tendo Katsura grinned at him. "This is his punishment. But hey, it could be worse. He could be one of you."

He moved the stick with Ji's face on it, and the pillar on the top of the wooden machine moved with a creaking sound. Something extended from it like a cannon, and at the end divided into five fingers. Before anyone could stop it, the machine had grabbed Miyake. Taki's MAC-11 roared and blasted the machine to pieces. A moment later, an ear-shattering scream came from the cloud of dust. Taki had almost forgotten—Miyake was a guard from the other side, human Psy Power was deadly to him.

Tendo Katsura laughed. "I put all of my son's energy into this tank. Put all of your Psy Power together, you wouldn't cause a scratch to him."

Taki nodded. "Thanks for the heads-up."

Miyake, dying and still in the grip of the machine that was Ji, used the last of his energy to pull the trigger on his flamethrower. It sent a whip of fire straight at Katsura.

Tendo jumped out of the way. "Put it out, Ji!"

The five fingers opened, dropping Miyake's limp form to the ground. Then the giant hand stamped the fire out. Then the fingers pointed to Taki.

"Got ya," the face of the machine said, just as a shot was fired.

"Get down!" Norie shouted from behind Taki. Taki dropped just as the rocket from Norie's Carl Gustav blazed over his head. The torrid fireball tore through the air and hit its target. The machine shuddered but did not explode. Something happened inside of it, and it sent out a vibration. Taki put his hands over both ears and bit down a scream. The vibration hit his head, and his brain felt like Jell-O. The demon's Psychic Power assaulted him. It was trying to shake him apart, molecule by molecule.

The fire that had engulfed the machine frizzled out and died. *That machine itself must be equipped with a Psy Power amplifier*, Taki thought. *That's how they were able to dig this huge hole.*

Taki jumped aside, avoiding the machine's hand that reached for him. But there was another shadow tracing Taki's movement. Katsura fired his own gun at Taki. Taki's MAC-11 spewed bullets. Katsura lurched, hit, and Taki felt something hot deep in his abdomen. The Psy Power inside

Katsura's bullet jumped around inside, trying to make a hole in his bowels.

Taki stood and stopped the bullet with his own Psy Power. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Makie fighting with the Ji-machine.

Was there a trap somewhere, waiting to be sprung? Taki could not afford to stop and think about it. He was turning into a dream more and more. He made a run for the prefab house, holding down the sizzling feeling in his stomach with his Psy Power.

The question was—where should he go? The house or the storehouse? His Psy Power told him to go to the storehouse. He reloaded his guns and walked to the door.

He cast a net of Psy Power to see if anyone lurked behind the door. It was clear, so he kicked it down. The first thing he saw was a dark shadow hunched over in the corner of a dimly lit room. As he hoisted his MAC-11 over his shoulder, the shadow slowly turned toward him.

The ugliest face Taki had ever seen greeted him, sending shivers down his spine. His first thought was that the face reflected a life lived with nothing but hate and deprivation.

"Glad you came," the old woman laughed, flailing her hair around. She pointed a long, crooked finger at him. "But you're not the Dream Guard. You have a strong Psychic Power, though. Renzaburo Taki perhaps?"

"Nice to meet you," Taki said. He peeked behind the old woman. There was his goal—a shabby-looking

wooden table with a stone pot sitting on it. "Move aside. I don't want to shoot an old lady."

The old woman cackled. "What a gentleman. I've heard about you. But sorry, you can't just ask nicely, not if you want to save the world. I know how to open up the third layer."

"So you're the one that unleashed the second layer." Taki's index finger tightened on the trigger.

"I'd love to say yes, but sadly, no. It appears we've had a rebellion among ourselves. I'm not completely surprised. It's partly my fault. I left the pot there, in plain sight. Maybe it was just begging to be opened."

The old lady bent forward, ever so slightly. Something—white, opaque, paper thin—floated away from her and into the air. She remained where she was, hunched over, but it was as if a thin piece of skin had peeled from her body and moved of its own accord. It expanded and took the shape of the old lady, a cloud-like copy. It lunged at Taki.

Taki jumped back and swung his MAC-11 sideways. The gun went right through the wispy body. However insubstantial she looked, the dream clone grabbed Taki and lifted him into the air.

At her touch, an intense sense of exhaustion came over Taki. He knew what it meant—his Psy Power was being drained. The ghost-like face smiling in front of him began to look more solid. It was as if someone had colored her in, her skin developing flesh tones, her lips a delicate shade of pink.

"Thanks. I feel alive," said the old lady clone. "Ooh, your Psy Power tastes so nice." Sucking energy was not only about killing for her. It helped her become real. "More. Give me more."

Taki squirmed out of her grip and landed on the floor, trying to avoid her slimy lips. Her face turned pale and her skin began to lighten when contact was broken. She grabbed him and stuck her wet tongue into his mouth, and she stabilized. Her body grew more solid.

Taki gripped the old lady's body and pushed more of his Psy Power into the half-finished shade. The sudden influx of Psy Power caused the shade to burst open, revealing both transparent skull and pinkish flesh. Her body dried up like a raisin and fell to pieces, dispersing like sand in the wind.

The real old lady clucked her tongue, impressed. "Nice work. You defeated my shadow. Well done, Renzaburo Taki."

As she tried to pull herself together for another attack, Taki put his MAC-11 against her body. "Still some Psy Power left here. Enough to do the same to you."

The old lady threw back her head and laughed. Taki pulled the trigger. His bullet and Psy Power flew into her, pushing her frail body into the table.

"What do you gain from killing me? Once the grudge is freed, it cannot be destroyed easily unless you use a special spell. And I am the only one who knows how."

Taki shook his head. "Who the hell are you?"

"Back in my day, people called me Shirei Ranko."

In the back of Taki's mind, the name rang a bell. She was a witch. "I heard that Tomon killed you seventy years ago in Nicaragua. Looks like you've outlived yourself."

"I don't need to live any longer," Ranko chuckled. "My life's work is almost over."

Taki pulled the trigger again, this time intending to end the witch. But he lost feeling in his fingers. The MAC-11 tumbled out of his grip and dropped to the prefab floor. There was another thud as his ammo pouch hit the floor.

Taki despaired. *God, not now. Don't turn me into a dream now!*

Ranko's eyes widened in understanding. "I didn't realize that you were haunted by his grudge! This is better than I expected."

More and more of Taki disappeared. First he felt a wave of dizziness wash over him, and then his vision went black.

Ranko watched as her biggest enemy melted away in front of her eyes. "Ooh, poor sod. Good luck, and I hope you show up in someone's dream quickly."

With that, she turned toward the door. A bulky, strangely shaped shadow came toward her. It was the machine that had been Tendo Ji. He had Makie and Norie in his wooden arms.

Tendo Katsura followed him, the floor creaking. Katsura had his gun pointed at Tanna.

Ranko laughed. "So you *can* be useful, even when your enemy's at that level."

Not showing any reaction to her sarcastic remark, Ji's inhuman voice spoke. "These two women . . . Let me have them . . ." The voice came from the face of Tendo Ji, buried in the wooden pillar.

Ranko let out a sardonic laugh. "You can still get it up, eh? You don't look your best, though. Okay, as a reward for discovering the way to open the third layer, have your way with them."

"Then I'll claim my share," Katsura said, still covering his stomach. Taki's MAC-11 had left a trail of bullet holes that ran from his left shoulder to his right side. His black shirt was drenched in blood, and his purplish lips and skin said he would soon die.

Ranko approved his request. "Do what you want." She didn't care what happened to Taki's two companions. "Take your pick of those two ladies. Leave the man untouched. He may come in useful."

Ji laughed. "Ha. You still up for it at your age?"

Katsura laughed sarcastically. He sounded incredibly spunky for a man who was dying. "Then, my son, I'll have the younger one. Don't look so disappointed. She'll be yours soon. She'll be all yours when I'm dead."

Katsura snatched the unconscious Makie and laid her on the floor. He stripped off her slacks but left her shirt alone. He rolled her onto her stomach. As Makie's firm white buttocks were revealed, a funny feeling rose up in Ji's machine body. The base supporting the pillar that was his face started to undulate, and then a club-like brown stick grew from the bottom. It was made of wood, like the

rest of him, but it was hot and soft and it vibrated. Tendo Ji's new joystick.

His arms shook Norie awake.

"Don't fight it," the face in the wood said. "If you want to die right now, right here, fine, but it won't be quick and painless. If you don't want to die, disrobe."

Norie knew what was coming. She stood no chance. She turned her head toward the sound of a deep groan nearby.

Katsura was fucking Makie from behind. Droplets of blood fell from his chest onto her white cheeks. Every time he rammed deep into her, blood splattered across her buttocks. Tanna was still out of it on the ground.

Norie let her body completely relax. Getting upset or tense wouldn't help her now.

"Strip." Ji ordered one more time and dropped her body onto his base.

Norie thought about her husband and two kids. She wanted to go home alive.

She took off her armor and coat. Her sweater and jeans followed. She did not feel ashamed. Having gone through brutal training to become a Black Guard, her thirty-seven-year-old body was still firm all over and shapely like that of a woman ten years younger. Her tits and ass looked great, too, and she knew it. Her stomach and hips were getting a little slack, but, well, she would do.

There was something very cheap and domestic about the bra and panties she was wearing, which only added

to the eroticism of the situation. Because she was ordinary, Norie's nudity could be even more arousing than Makie's.

Ji watched her with anticipation. "Take . . . them . . . off."

Norie complied and took off her bra, her fleshy breasts spilling out. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she started pulling down her panties.

"Leave them around one leg," ordered Ji's voice. "I'm going to treat you like a whore."

Norie complied. She had done it before. Her husband had asked her for similar things, made her put on gaudy panties or garters that he bought from a sex shop. He always asked her to put on heavy makeup and liked to fuck her from behind. Fucking a prostitute was not his cup of tea; he was excited by the fact that his wife was acting like a whore for him. Her husband demanded her attention four times a week. Her sex life was good.

Ji pulled her attention back to the present. "Hold it in your hand . . . make it bigger. I am capable of ejaculating."

Norie nodded. She grabbed his stick and started stroking it. The texture was that of wood, but it throbbed like a regular cock as she gave him a hand job. Then Norie took it into her mouth. It was shaped like a normal penis, and it did not make her feel sick. She had been told that female Black Guards were bound to go through something like this sooner or later. For creatures on the other

side, humans were food. But Black Guards with Psy Power could be seen as sex objects. She knew of one superior who had been taken captive by a demon and raped for two years. She knew how awful and yet how addictive the sex with them was. She waited with anticipation. She sucked faster. She could not get her children and husband out of her head. She realized that she was consciously holding on to them, to keep her grounded.

She sucked on his penis so hard her cheeks hollowed. She shook her head for good measure, wondering what the wood's semen tasted like.

A hardwood hand lifted her hips up in the air as the penis popped out of her mouth. Norie felt the wood stroke the lips of her vagina, and she moaned. It was the first penis she had ever touched except her husband's. Her pussy was tight and deep. She knew how to move like a slut. Thinking dirty thoughts made her hornier.

The wood slid deep into her. He was big, and it felt good.

"Ooh . . ." Norie moaned louder.

Ji pulled his cock out a little.

"Noo. No. Don't."

"Don't do what? Don't fuck you? Or don't stop?"

"Noo . . ."

"Say it."

"Please . . . put it back in. Fuck me. Now," Norie pleaded. That was it. She was his.

"Good." Ji moved slowly into her, torturing her on the edge of ecstasy. Norie's pussy swallowed him to the root.

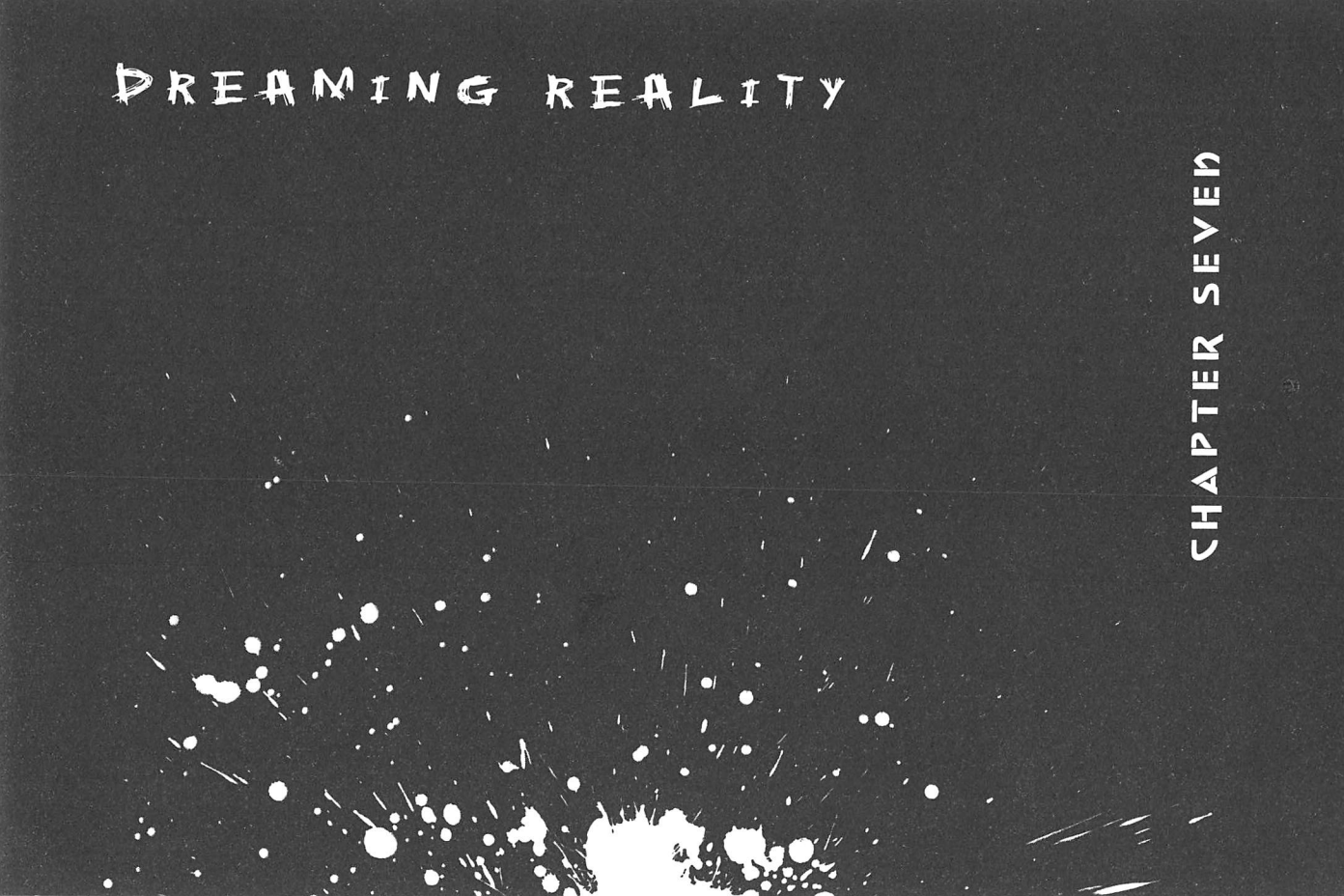
Her hips started to move rhythmically as she fucked him in return.

In one corner of a bar reeking of urine, a red-faced drunkard looked into the sky.

"God . . . They've done it. They've opened the third layer . . ."

DREAMING REALITY

CHAPTER SEVEN



1

THE WORLD was changing, in ways no one could have imagined. The change, which had only been a dream before, had gained substance and become a real phenomenon, though it still remained hard to grasp.

The *Edy Poe*, a steamship in the Indian Ocean, suddenly disappeared. Despite vigorous search efforts by the Indian government, the ship remained missing except for one final sighting, nowhere near India.

Sixteen hours after its disappearance, a commotion awoke Mrs. Grea Parnel. She approached the window of her home at 24 Parker Street in Sydney, Australia, and peeked outside. She saw a huge ship, hovering three

meters above the narrow street that was barely wide enough for two cars. According to Mrs. Parnel's statement, the ship appeared real—she could see paint peeling from the hull and rust on the bottom. The most amazing part was that the ship floated in the middle of the cramped street and yet the buildings surrounding it remained intact.

What disturbed Mrs. Parnel the most was the dozens of crew members she viewed on the deck reaching out for help. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but they called to her. Some were African, some Asian, and some Caucasian. They looked terrified. All she could do was express her sympathy and confusion, although she wished she could do something to help. On the third-class deck, a small white boy waved to her frantically. She felt awful for the boy. She waved back, and the ship vanished into thin air. The boy had seemed oddly familiar to her. He reminded her of her ex-husband, with whom she broke up because he had an affair. Could this boy have been his child?

It was not the first or only incident of its kind. The dream beast could also move through time. At the same time the ship appeared in Sydney, another ship was targeted. On December 4, 1872, a vessel traveling seven hundred miles off Saint Vincent Cape fell victim to the dream beast. Captain Briggs, his wife, their daughter, Pauline Sophia, and the chief officer were having breakfast in the captain's cabin. The cook was shaving, using a mirror in the kitchen. There were four sailors on deck and another two inside, busily stacking goods.

The captain put down his coffee cup. Mrs. Briggs brought a spoonful of oatmeal to her daughter's mouth. The cook turned around. One sailor looked into the sky, another looked at the water, and another looked out across the sea.

They all saw the fearsome, ugly creature flying at them. Before the horror hit them head-on, all turned into a dream. More than an hour later, another ship, the *Dei Gratia*, was cruising in a remote region between Nova Scotia and Great Britain, with Captain Morehouse and three sailors aboard. They sighted Briggs's ship, the *Mary Celeste*, which sailed silently by and disappeared before their eyes.

More changes happened every minute. One chunk of the Himalayas turned into an illusion, which caused the Sahara to freeze instantly. Scientists reported that the Sahara would turn into a vast cropland in a few decades. Nobody was thrilled.

Rebellious students, plotting against the renovation of the Louvre museum, decided to destroy the Eiffel Tower to make their point. They boarded a Cessna loaded with explosives. As they reached fourteen meters from the tower, *poof*, the tower disappeared in a haze. The explosives went off, killing five people and injuring four who were on the ground.

. . .

Disappearing objects were only the beginning. Brooke Shelly was in the middle of shooting a kissing scene at the Elmwood Studio in London. Suddenly she flipped out, screaming that the actor was a hideous monster. In the middle of her tirade, a grotesque creature slid from between her lips. It had innumerable tentacles, all growing and gyrating like a pile of worms. The thing took off and penetrated every woman in London. Three hours after Brooke gave birth to the creature, two thousand women delivered dream children. Those babies grew to full size instantly and went out on a raping spree.

The world was in chaos. The Black Guards fought with all they had, but there were so few of them. It was a losing battle from the start.

"Dream Guard!" cried out a Black Guard in New York, as he squeezed out every bit of Psy Power he had.

"Dream Guard!" A guard in Berlin yelled his name as he tranformed into a dream.

"Dream Guard!" The Hospital director in Nishiazabu called out, too.

The man they called was drinking in a bar in Shinjuku. He looked pie-eyed as he poured himself a seventh cup of cheap liquor. At the rate he was going, he was guaranteed a terrible headache the next morning. The man sitting next to him made a face as the disheveled drunk blubbered something about "the beast" and the "third layer" and someone opening it.

"Hey, mister," the bartender called to him, his head

cocked to one side. "Call it a night, all right? How are you going to get home?"

The drunkard stopped swaying and sat still, as if his spine had turned to steel. The bartender was glad to get some kind of reaction but was disappointed when he saw the man looking around the nearly empty bar, as if searching for someone.

His stuttering was barely audible. *Taki*, the bartender thought he heard the drunk call out.

"Give me a break," the drunkard spat out. He shook his head. "Now the third layer is open, things are going to get rough. There's nothing I can do. I don't have to try. I just know!"

"Hey, you," the bartender called. He exchanged a suspicious glance with the man sitting next to the drunkard. "I'm sorry, but I want you out of here. We're closing."

"Oh, don't give me that." There was a whine in the drunk's voice. The bartender was ready to physically throw him out when he realized the voice had not come from the drunk man. For the first time he noticed another customer sitting across from him. He seemed like a quiet type, sitting on a stool with an unassuming air. The tall, handsome man gave the bartender a wink.

"Come on, let him have another one. Then I'll take him home."

"For real?" the bartender asked.

The man nodded. *Oh, well*, the bartender thought. *I guess it couldn't hurt*. He poured liquor into the drunk's

cup, and the two men proceeded with their conversation.

"Ten thousand people in Moscow now see the opposite sex as repulsive," Taki said. "Same with Canada, Greenland, India, and Australia. They've opened the third layer. But we still have you. You can put an end to this. The enemy's name is Shirei Ranko. She's a legendary witch."

Saga snorted into his liquor. "Good luck."

"There's nothing more I can do. Hanako'll vanish, too."

"The end. It's come a little earlier than Nostradamus's predictions, but it's the end of the world. Welcome to it."

"Saga . . . "

"Good-bye."

"Here you go," the bartender said, placing two cups on the counter. "That's some story you were telling. Oh—where's your friend? The guy you were just talking to?"

The drunkard rolled up his bloodshot eyes to look at the bartender. "Talking? Come on, you should have your head looked at."

"You know, that nice, clean-cut . . ." The bartender shook his head and looked at the seat where Taki had been. He yelled toward the back of the bar. "Let's call it a day. Terrible headache. Either that or I'm going insane."

As he turned to give the drunkard the bill, the bartender realized there was never anyone sitting there to begin with. The seat was empty.

. . .

Shirei Ranko looked down on Tendo Katsura. He lay on the floor of their hideout in the Hibiya subway. Tendo's stomach was bloody from where Taki's bullet had torn a hole. The bullet, packed with Taki's Psy Power, was draining his life rapidly.

"Are you cold?" asked Shirei Ranko. She studied him, as if he were an experimental specimen. "I thought I had seen everything. One thing I cannot understand is the agony of death. I somehow envy you, Katsura."

"So by dying I can finally outdo you?" Katsura laughed. "And I so wanted to see our plan through to the end. I wanted to live to see how things play out. Have you opened the third layer?"

"Not yet. I can, but I haven't. I have a feeling the third layer will destroy the world. It's a bummer," Ranko said.

"I beg to differ. You shouldn't forget they have a Dream Guard."

"I know. I'm not dismissing him as a loser. But I don't think he can beat the beast, either." She paused and glanced at Katsura. "One thing that has been nagging me. You know about four years ago . . ."

The eyes of the dying man turned lucid. "Yes. Someone set the beast free. It wasn't our doing. Whose was it? And how did they put it back?"

"I launched a vigorous investigation, but nothing. I'm sticking to my theory," Ranko said.

"I'm afraid your theory doesn't hold up. If it was a plot hatched by the Black Guard Council, for whatever reason, why are they struggling now?" Katsura answered.

"That leads us to another question. Do you think there's a third power, not of the human world or of the demonic? Someone who's powerful enough to pull that off?"

"No. There is none," Tendo Katsura answered.

"That's right. We didn't do it. They did. The question is why?"

"Three thousand people went crazy and six hundred and forty-nine Black Guards died, just because it appeared for a few minutes. Nothing is worth sacrifice on this scale. Our hermetic mathematician had already come to that conclusion," Katsura said.

"That calculation has proven right, but only for now. Who knows what will happen down the road?" Ranko looked at Katsura. Suddenly she bent over, reaching her left hand toward his trousers.

"Lingen hermetic mathematics should have included a grace period of a hundred thousand years. We should have tried every combination and order imaginable. Then we'd know what we can gain or lose from releasing the beast. But they wouldn't hear of it, stupid old men. They narrowed it down to ten thousand. Because it takes a decade of preparation if we were to give it a hundred thousand years."

Katsura watched as Ranko's pale fingers pulled down his zipper. "If we had adopted your theory, Ranko, ninety-

nine percent of the members involved should have been dead. That was a necessary decision."

Ranko shrugged. "And another thing. Who was it that opened the second layer? You're not going to get away with not telling me, just because you're dying."

"Please, don't," Katsura begged. "I can't tell you. Death will not bring me peace."

Ranko listened for a second to a sound coming from nearby. "Do you think . . . someone like *that* would?" She laughed thinly at the anguished cries that leaked into the room. Not cries, exactly—passionate panting.

It had been going on for hours. The two women had been ravaged as Tendo Ji raped them. He had been held responsible for failing to assassinate Saga Miyuki and had been turned into a wooden tank as punishment. It didn't seem like punishment at the moment.

Makie sat with her legs open on the front of his vehicle body. Her vagina was on very public display. She was beautiful—every inch, even the most embarrassing parts of her body. The wetter she got, the more brightly her vagina shined. The slash of her pussy was obscenely pink as something large thrust into it. It looked like a stick, growing from the tank, but it was actually Ji's penis. It was thick, like the large end of a baseball bat, and smooth. Ji moved his wooden cock in and out of Makie slowly. Makie opened her legs wide, so she could bask in pleasure. Ji's cock was so big, so skillful at making her come, that she took him inside her with relish.

She was not entirely naked, but she only wore a black

garter belt and lacy bra. No panties. Ji's grotesque member was rammed deep into the woman from the demonic world, and she could not get enough of it. It stretched her tight vagina with each thrust, and it felt so good Makie couldn't help but cry out in ecstasy.

Another woman sat atop the tank, her legs wrapped around the wooden pillar. Her lower belly was slightly flabby, and her whole body had signs of her thirty-seven years. Segawa Norie, the Black Guard from the human world, was ripe and willing to take anything. She was also a housewife and a little homely, which made her even sexier than Makie. An ordinary wife being raped by a demon in one shady corner of the underground was hot.

Norie pulled herself tight to the wood, rubbing her pussy on the pillar. She was so wet that her vaginal juices ran down the wooden sides of the tank. There was a sound—the slick sound of licking. The wooden pillar was licking her pussy.

Norie pressed herself against the curved surface of the wood, rubbing her sweet spot against its smoothness, shuddering as she came. A human face was embedded into the pillar. Eyes and mouth and nose, everything made of wood. Ji's face. His wooden tongue emerged from the lips, slithering to lick Norie with an obscene noise. He had been giving her oral sex for nearly three hours now, like an obsession. Ji was fucking a housewife and a demon at the same time, ménage à trois. It was the fantasy of every man, no matter his species.

His tongue was rough, like a grindstone. It felt so good

on her clit that Norie responded passionately, giving herself to him more intensely. The more he licked her, the wetter she got. She climaxed again and again, each time harder and longer. She called out for her husband and her kids over and over—which only made her want it more. There was a hot rush in her crotch as she came again. She was melting. *Please tear it apart and bite the soft flesh and make it all bloody*, Norie thought.

These women are nothing but bitches in heat, reaching orgasm again and again, Ji thought as he fucked them both.

"Enough of that," Ranko said. "On to business." Her right hand gripped Katsura's cock.

She might be the wickedest witch ever, but did she have to have sex with a dying man?

Katsura grinned as she lifted up her black robe, exposing her legs, each wrinkle deep as a cut, and straddled his loins.

He looked lurid, the face of a dying man. The smile on his face was too horrible to be his last smile. Ranko sat on it. She moaned as Katsura licked her pussy.

"The world's end is nigh. I can see it. The third layer's just opened, and look what's happening. It's a mess. Ooh, I'm wet. I'm so wet. It's so hot. It's burning." She slid down his body until she settled herself on his hard cock. She started to ride him. "Yes. Thrust into me. Harder. Harder. Do it until you die."

"Don't . . . don't let your guard down," Tendo Katsura warned her with the look of a man who was taking

his last breath. In fact, he was getting there. "They've got a Dream Guard up their sleeve. And Renzaburo Taki is not to be forgotten. He'll come back."

His hips thrust up and down as he spoke. Up and down. Up and down. With every move, the pain intensified. Actually he had become almost numb.

"More. More. Give me your power. Send it into me. Ah, yes! Faster."

"Miss. Ranko. Good life." Tendo Kei said his goodbye.

The next minute, something hot gushed deep in the vagina of the ancient old witch. Ranko let out a cry of pleasure. Simultaneously Tendo Katsura died, after releasing his last breath with a wild howl. Ranko took his semen, which poured out even after his heart had stopped beating, into her.

2

TAKI HAD been transformed into a dream. He had no idea whose dream it was. The important thing was that he existed, because someone was dreaming about him. Only Saga Miyuki and the dream beasts could live and control dreams when nobody was dreaming about them.

Finally Taki recognized the dreamer. It was quite a

shock to find out he could read minds from all over the world once he was a dream.

Dream was a universe created by living things. Humans dream. Animals dream. Extraterrestrials dream—it felt weird to feel the power that flew out from the psyche of all living things.

The dream universe Taki was in now had been created by human energy. All the dreams of humanity spun around Taki. If Taki had not been a dream himself, he would have gone crazy.

The enemy was already there the moment he turned into a dream. The grudge of the beast. Taki was not the only target. The beast was lashing out at all living things in the universe. No time or spatial distance existed in dreams. The grudge of the beast turned up in every kind of dream and fed on them.

Even as a dream, Taki was quick and sharp. During the transition, he had not lost a thing. He still had his M29. He fired, and dream .44 Magnum bullets roared their way toward the beast.

Flames engulfed the grudge. The beast's dream cells were destroyed, not by the bullet itself but by the Psychic Power that had been soaked into it. The fire that surrounded the grudge burned in rainbow colors.

Unfortunately for Taki, the enemy was almost immortal. As long as the real beast lived, its spirit would stay in the dream universe. Taki's Psy Power could not deliver a fatal blow. He took another six shots, and the enemy backed off. Taki moved in, inching toward it. He couldn't

move any faster—the physics of the dream were fundamentally different than those of the real world. All kinds of dreams existed in the realm of dream. There was no distance between things; at the same time distance was infinite.

The same rule applied to the assailant. It continually changed shape, so that Taki could not see what it looked like. One minute it was a beautiful woman, the next an animal with fangs, lunging toward him.

There was no time to load more ammo. In an instant, the tentacles of the grudge wrapped themselves around Taki's ankles. In the next, the grudge and Taki's Psy Power crashed into each other and broke into a million pieces. Shivers ran down Taki's spine.

No human was made to handle this kind of fear, not even a Black Guard. Taki was almost overcome with despair. There was no escape and no victory. He gathered all the Psy Power he could and sent it out to the dreamer. He enhanced the dreamer's subconscious, told him to elude the attacker, baring its many fangs, before it had a chance to do real damage.

The world was suddenly sizzling with energy. Taki stopped, gripped by fear. The grudge, the tormentor of the dream universe, loomed before him.

Taki shook himself free of the fear. He could not be easily intimidated. He installed a fresh magazine. It was something of a miracle that Taki had been competing against the grudge with only a six-shot magazine to begin with.

The feeling of the dream changed. Agony and horror roared around him. Taki paused, wondering what it was like to die as a dream. In another heartbeat, Taki knew what was going on. The beast was being attacked by an outside force.

The dream world was fighting back. *All* of them. Now it was dreams against the grudge. The dreams of animals sprang upon the beast. Crustacean creatures' dreams fought, their claws scissors high in the air. Elemental dreams attempted to destabilize the grudge's atomic momentum.

Fire's dreams.

Air's dreams.

The grudge was on fire. It had been struck by both lightning and heat. It thrashed around in pain. Its heart had stopped beating.

Someone dreamed of a submachine gun pumping bullets into the beast. A dream from the city of Atlantis blew it away, and then a Tiger tank knocked it down with its caterpillar.

There was a glimmer of hope, Taki thought. He could do it! A strong force pushed him forward. He felt who it was. Saga, drinking in some bar in Shinjuku, had made contact. Saga was the only human who was capable of bouncing between reality and dream on purpose. Taki was suddenly in the bar, looking at Saga. Saga's intense gaze was on him, and the message to Taki was clear—*do not let them open the third layer.*

The bartender was the only one who noticed the

exchange between Taki and Saga. Saga's incredible power was keeping him in the real world.

Taki found himself sitting at the bar. He threatened Saga, he pleaded for help, and he tried to coerce, but nothing worked. Eventually Saga gave in and agreed to take a look at the dream world and see what had happened. He sent Taki back and then transformed himself into dream, where he joined Taki.

"Whose dream is this?" Saga asked.

"So many things become clear when you're a dream," Taki noted. "This only lasts as long as someone remembers you. I don't know what will happen when that someone wakes up."

Saga's voice was quiet but sincere. "If nobody's dreaming about you, you become thinner and thinner. Eventually you fade away altogether. Well, you will. I can get out. Sorry."

The battle raged on around them. The grudge ran toward them as if on cue. It was now in the shape of a white tsunami, close to twenty-three thousand meters tall. As it crashed down on them, it changed form again, this time into a gigantic mouth with fangs.

"Idiot." Saga mumbled. He balled his right hand into a fist and held it in the air. Just before the fangs reached Saga's body, he opened his hand. The fang, about to penetrate his skull, turned into brittle plastic. It broke into a million pieces, cascading over Saga's palm. It was like watching a magician performing an illusion for an audience. In a matter of a few seconds, the evil thing

turned to dust. Just gone, with one gesture from a single man.

Taki gawked at Saga. Of course Taki had heard the stories, but nothing could have prepared him for this display. This was the Dream Guard.

Saga shrugged, as if to say it was nothing.

"I've never seen anything like that. You freak," Taki said. His voice was tinged with both fear and admiration. "You said that there was nothing you could do when the third layer was opened? Seriously?"

"You're confusing a fat person with a professional sumo wrestler. That grudge was from the second layer. The third one is something else. The moment it opens, I'm dead." Saga said it as if he were commenting about the weather, a fact that could not be changed.

"You can die all you want when your job is done," Taki said and looked around. "Dream doesn't have spatial distance, which allows us to turn up anywhere we want. Bring us to the Hibiya subway line. Their lair is somewhere between Ginza and Hibiya. Makie's being held there."

"Got it. But you go alone. Be a man," Saga said.

"Don't be such an ass," Taki groaned. His tone was casual, but a part of him had not recovered from the shock of seeing his partner at work. Saga could rule the world if he wished. What a power.

"This is terrible," Saga said, looking around at the dream world. "Most of it is just one big nightmare. People are going to die without a good night's sleep."

"You're the only one that can save them," Taki said, not even attempting to be subtle.

Saga gave a sigh. "You're really trying hard to get me killed. Okay, we've come this far, why not a little more?"

"I owe you," Taki said gratefully.

"Now hold on. You need to understand something. I cannot make a dream real. That takes a different kind of ability. Primitive spells, something Shirei Ranko might know." Saga thought for another moment. "Looks like it's time we made her acquaintance."

Taki nodded. The two of them walked together. At Saga's command, they stepped out of the dream into the reality. Into the murky corner of the underground station. The first thing they saw was the wooden machine that Tendo Ji had become. He was raping Norie.

The penis of the machine was lodged deep inside her, rhythmically pumping in and out, while white fingers played with her nipples and clit. Norie's own fingers. Tendo Ji was forcing her to masturbate as he raped her.

Ji sensed a presence, and the pillar on top of the base turned to face them. He gave a haughty laugh. "I'm afraid you're too late, Dream Guard. We've moved our operation. I only decided to stick around because of this slut. She's a great lay, and she loves it. You saved me a trip. I'll take care of both of you later."

"Where are Makie and your father?" Taki asked. He couldn't do anything for Norie at the moment except distract her rapist.

Ji didn't even break his stride. "Dad's dead. I'll bet

he's got a great seat in hell for all the evil things he's done. The bitch is with Ranko. Don't bother going after her. She won't make it. And good luck finding them."

The pillar spun, and a long arm aimed directly at them. Ji's cannon. Total darkness and stillness enveloped the two men. The shot of Psy Power hit them between their eyes. The next minute, their heads blew up like balloons. Then they exploded, splattering the tank with sticky debris.

Tendo Ji's hysterical laughter echoed around the room. As he laughed, he ejaculated on the housewife's ass, sticky tree sap coating her skin.

Please don't get me pregnant, Norie prayed as the flood of cum ran down her ass and into her crotch. She couldn't imagine what his sperm would give life to inside her.

Suddenly the splattered bits of flesh turned into hundreds of faces—all of them the faces of Saga and Taki. Every one of them bared their teeth and bit into the impenetrable tank from every direction. Their dream-powered teeth sank into the body of the tank, spewing Ji's tree-sap blood.

"You freaks." Tendo Ji spat out the words. He closed his eyes and concentrated. A bright flash of light surrounded him. A barrier of pure Psychic Power.

The heads of Saga and Taki received the brunt of the blast. Again they burst like bubbles, winking out and leaving the room quiet except for Ji's engine.

"I guess that's that. I'll finish off this whore when I'm done with her. After that, I've got no place to go. I guess

I'll spend the rest of my life attacking passengers on the platforms."

"You're going to become a shut-in, at your age?"

The voice came so unexpectedly it made Tendo Ji flinch. He knew whose voice it was. "Impossible," he whispered.

Two lumpy human heads floated in the air in front of him. They grew shoulders and chests and hips. Their feet touched the floor, and they were complete once more.

Ji was stunned. "You . . . How did you break my Psy Power?"

"You still don't get it?" Saga spoke quietly. His voice was calm and cool and had a ring that Tendo Ji could not quite describe. "You're really a thick one, aren't you? Look under your feet."

The face buried in the pillar turned, his eyes glancing down. Half of the tank was submerged in the water.

"What the—" Ji cried. His eyes widened. "Wait, I get it. This is your world. You've brought us to the dream realm."

"Right on. Your Psy Power has no effect in the world I created. Now, tell me where we can find Shirei Ranko."

"I will. When we go to hell."

Something moved beneath the surface of the water, splashing a little. Perhaps he was ready to die, because Tendo Ji came at the two men, full force. He barreled into Taki and Saga. Anyone watching would have thought the tank knocked down two shadows. But it was the tank's

body that was blown back, along with the naked Norie. The tank splintered into tiny fragments.

Ji was not done yet, however. The fine fragments bobbed on the surface of the water, moving toward each other as if magnetized. With incredible speed, the fragments joined together until the tank was re-formed.

"Death in dream is a dream," Saga announced sadly. "As long as you stay here, you don't get to choose the way you die. You want to live like this, where you keep trying to kill yourself and I don't let you? That's pathetic. If you want to end your life, let me know. I'll send you back to the real world in a heartbeat. Just tell me where Ranko is."

With a furious yell, Tendo Ji unleashed Psy Power on them once more. Cracks appeared along the walls and in the ceiling. The whole thing crashed in on him, and he was buried in the rubble. A second later, the room was whole once more, and so was Ji. The floor wavered under his feet, turned into water, and swept him away. The next minute it was gone, and he stood facing them.

"Ranko is . . . someplace where you can see stars clearly," Tendo Ji said through gritted teeth, his voice trembling with shame and resentment. "Now come on, let's really do this. I want to fight you in the real world."

"I'll take him on," said Taki. "How long can I be real?"

Saga rubbed the top of his head, thinking. "Twenty seconds. That's the best I can do."

Taki nodded. "That's more than enough. Okay. Come on."

STAR VS. STAR

CHAPTER EIGHT

1

SAGA TOOK a step back as Norie fell to the ground with a thud.

There was nothing else but silence. This was the beginning of the death match.

Three meters separated the two gladiators. The right hand of Renzaburo Taki was engulfed in dark fire. The air around him buzzed and shook as he aimed his .44 Magnum and pumped Psy Power–laced bullets into the wooden tank.

There was a flash of light as the bullets hit Ji's Psy Power barrier, and the shots bounced off. Tendo Ji did

not waste a second. He counterattacked, releasing Psy Power from his two arms into Taki's body.

Taki took the blow, his arms crossed. Psychic Power was capable of disturbing the body's atomic makeup. Taki was prepared, though, and Ji's Psy Power had no effect on him. The shock wave did rattle every cell in his body, but Taki focused his own Psy Power into a shield, dissipating the attack.

Tendo Ji fired another blast. Taki must not have been prepared, and his slender frame exploded, splattering everywhere.

"I've done it!" Ji whooped. "I knew he couldn't beat me, that idiot." He quickly whirled around to attack Saga.

"Not so fast, buddy," said a deep voice.

Ji turned his face toward the voice, speechless. A huge .44 Magnum bullet was driven into the middle of his face. It split in two. The tank began to crack like a porcelain vase. Without any fanfare, Ji's body was reduced to sawdust.

Saga hooted at Taki, who remained standing with his gun in his hand. "You made him dream your dream. When did you learn that? You never give up for anything, do you?"

Taki waved the praise away. "We haven't got time for that. You need to find that place with stars. That's where your Ranko and the pot are hiding."

A hollow groan came from the floor near Saga's feet. Segawa Norie had come around and was trying to sit up. They ran to her side.

Norie saw their faces, but at the same time she didn't. When she looked up, she was greeted by the ugliest freaks she had ever seen. Not the handsome man who had given her hours of pleasure, had made her climax so many times. Something disturbing and disgusting looked back at her, as if they wanted to eat her alive.

Norie stepped back, screaming frantically, "Don't come closer, you freaks!"

Saga and Taki looked at each other, nonplussed. "I got rid of the grudge from the second layer. Looks like she's being possessed by the grudge of the third layer," Saga muttered. He was suddenly blurry around the edges, as if he were fading. He was gone.

Norie slumped down without a word, unconscious.

A second later, Saga returned. "I took care of the thing that had taken her over. It hadn't been out very long. Not much harm done. I'll talk to the Black Guard Council about it." He put his hands on his hips and looked at the ceiling. "So, where can you see stars? Is it a hill? Tokyo Tower, maybe?"

No reply. Saga turned around, but Taki was nowhere to be seen. He had been transformed into a dream again.

"We never saw it coming," the voice cracked.

"No, we certainly didn't. I never thought it would come to this." The voice that replied was younger but definitely mature, solid, and cautious.

"So do you think we should let that thing out?" the first voice asked.

"Eventually, yes. But we still have our Dream Guard. Calls are coming in that unnatural phenomena are decreasing in number. He must have done something."

"He won't be a match for the beast," the first voice mused.

"Let it out of the cage and have them fight it out. Set it in motion."

"At the moment our studies suggest he is capable of controlling it. But once he's hit with the beast, or the spirit of it, he will lose control. And it is very possible that some of our members might get hurt in the process."

"I thought we had already tried it."

"Yes, and we succeeded. Once. But it asks for too much sacrifice. I'm afraid it's not worth repeating, considering the damage it would cause. We would need thousands of years to train new Black Guards to replace them."

There was a pause. After a while, the younger one spoke again. "If the fourth layer pops, action will need to be taken. It's already been set in motion."

"You mean, what our illusions discussed the night the beast tried to trick Taki into releasing it? It's actually going to happen? Ironically, it's our choice . . . Well, it's very sad, Tomon. I will hate to lose them."

"Same here. The pot is designed to open up to the second layer. We designed it that way so the Dream Guard would be alerted to the danger and could stop it before it went further."

"Well, he's been doing a great job so far. It's just that the enemy is too strong." Tomon shook his head sadly.

Her skin had become numb to the freezing wind. Even with goose bumps covering her body, Makie looked beautiful and sexy. She wore black underwear and was tied, spread-eagle, to the ground. Her back was the only part that was still able to feel, and it was cold. She was laid out on a concrete floor.

The steel frames supporting the floor were 227 meters long. The platform was high, bringing them close to the cloudless night sky. The stars seemed bigger than usual. They were on top of one of the buildings in downtown Tokyo.

Beside Makie was Tanna, one of the Black Guards who had fought with Taki in the underground. He had been captured and carried here. He was naked, too, and firm all over. He was a trained Black Guard, after all. He, like Makie, was spread-eagle and restrained. His penis was hard, despite the situation. He could not move, except for his eyeballs. And he could see Makie beside him. She knew he was watching but did not acknowledge it. That drove Tanna crazy. Here she was, Miss Cool, wearing nothing but black, crotchless underwear, spread-eagle. The sight made him so horny; if he hadn't been tied down he would have jumped her and fucked her hard. He wanted to know what she looked like when she came. She probably looked even more beautiful.

The platform was edged by a low wall. In front of the wall sat a small stone pot. Beside it, a hunched-over shadow stirred. It had been a good hour since she had assumed that position. Two hours since Makie and Tanna had been tied down.

The black hooded figure turned around, revealing the face of Shirei Ranko.

"Now, it's time. Our highest authority has figured out how to release the beast. Once it is out, it's not going away easy."

For the first time, a look of horror swept over Makie's face. "You're not going to open the fourth . . . ?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do!" Ranko replied with a cackle. She nodded and looked into the sky. She looked livelier than ever and moved with exceptional briskness.

"This is where the beast is going to deliver his baby. I can't think of a better place than here. He can look down on those despicable humans—no, all living things in this universe—and inflict his nightmare on them. It will be midnight soon. Before we get to that, I'm going to give you a taste of his power. Who are we to spoil the gift?" Ranko chuckled.

Ranko got closer to the pot, her black robe fluttering in the wind. She mumbled something in an ancient language not spoken in a hundred centuries.

It was the end of the world. The end for all living things in the universe.

Ranko finished the spell. In an entirely different voice,

she announced, "Just a little taste. I'm going to let him out, just a little. Which of you do you think he'll find desirable, hmm?"

Neither of them answered; they only braced themselves for what was coming. In the back of her mind, Makie thought about sex with Taki. Guards from the demonic world were considered aggressive when it came to sex. *Am I, as well?* Makie wondered. Would it help her to survive now?

And then the beast's vibration hit her. Yes, it was only a little bit, perhaps only a hair's breadth. But Makie knew it when it happened. She felt the air shimmer with enormous power as it came out of the opening of the small pot, seeping into the dark of the night. She knew what it could do.

Tanna let out a scream. It was the awful gut-wrenching sound of a soul being torn in two. Makie bit back her own scream. If she screamed, she would lose her mind. It would drive her nuts and leave her a prisoner of her own thoughts. The mission of the Black Guards was to keep fighting, even if it meant their own demise.

In another dim room, the owners of two voices set a plan in motion.

2

A MAN, sitting in the back of a taxi headed toward Shibako Park, suddenly shrieked.

"S-sir? What's the matter?!" the taxi driver asked, confused but calm enough not to slam on his brakes. He looked in the rearview mirror. The passenger had buried his face in the seat.

The man looked up but was barely able to control his trembling voice. "I-I'm fine . . . thanks. I'm not going to the Tokyo Tower. Take me to Shinjuku."

The driver was worried about his passenger but wanted to get him out of his cab quickly. "You got it. You sure you don't want to go to the hospital?

"No . . . Just take me to Shinjuku . . . Oh, no, no, no! That's two," Saga despaired.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Just go faster. It's going to be a disaster. I can go on my own, but it's not *possible right now.*"

"I don't know what you're saying. I won't be held responsible for what happens to you, okay? Here we go." The driver turned the car around.

The driver could no longer see the passenger's face, but if he could have, he would have stopped his car and run away screaming. Saga Miyuki's body lay across the

seat, twitching. He was wet, covered in dark liquid. Blood black as ink burst from every pore.

It was twenty minutes to midnight, Japan time.

Strange things were happening across the globe. In New York, a manager of a brokerage house was in the middle of a meeting when he froze, unable to move or speak. In London, a retired veteran who liked to take a daily walk through Hyde Park became rigid as he sat on a bench. In Paris, in front of a café on the Champs d'Elysées, a girl and boy, both five years old, stopped where they were and did not move. A teacher at a junior high school in Osaka, a priest in Mozambique. Brasilia. Ankara. All over the world, people froze in their tracks.

When the victims arrived at their local hospitals, people could not figure out why their bodies were so rigid, though they were relieved to discover that at least their hearts were beating.

What no one knew, at least no one outside of the Black Guard, was that global Body Rigidity was one of their best damage control measures. Once it was activated, only in direst need, people all over the world would stop wherever they were, free from all senses—no sight, no hearing, no sense of smell or taste, no sense of touch. It would keep them safe from psychic attack; they would be unaffected.

Makie, on the other hand, was not rigid. She felt its presence as it surged up. But she could not get a bead on what it wanted. She had no clue what it was feeling. It was not hate or anger or derision. There was nothing.

Its gaze almost burned a hole in Makie. Something shimmered in the air in front of her. It was trying to take shape. It stared at her.

Tanna started laughing beside her; the laugh of the insane. He had gone mad at just this little taste of the beast.

Makie felt its presence hover between her legs. Her entire body was exposed to the lingering glare of the beast. It eyed her vagina carefully.

Makie's beauty was intensified as her body reddened in terror and shame. Shirei Ranko looked on, her expression hard as a stone.

The shimmering form moved, and an indescribable sensation shot through Makie's body. She moaned with pleasure; she couldn't help herself. She was wet almost immediately. Her pussy was on fire. With just one touch, it had almost pushed her to orgasm. She wanted it more. Makie grunted, trying to control herself. She could not give in.

It touched her again, this time longer and more aggressively. Makie realized in horror what it was doing. The beast's rough tongue cleaned her pussy and slipped inside her. Makie tried to resist but was doing a poor job of it. The moment she gave in, that was it, she would belong to it. She would end up a basket case if she gave in to ecstasy.

She clenched a fist, her nails biting into her flesh, blood streaking between her fingers. However hard her mind pushed away, her body reacted differently. It told her to be a whore. To surrender.

The monster nipped at her with its teeth. A mind-numbing sting.

Makie rolled her hips. She could not help it; the beast knew what it was doing as it raped her. To it, she was a toy to be played with. And she had no choice but to take it. A part of her knew that she would have to give in at some point. She moaned again. She wanted to be free, wanted to wrap her legs around its invisible body and press her pussy into it so it could get deeper inside her. She wanted it inside her.

This was it, she thought. The villain was not about to let her off the hook easily.

It cleaned every fold that surrounded the lovely bud of her clit. The tongue moved slowly and with purpose. Her every cell was on fire. Not burning—steaming.

The monster's attack became more intense. Makie wanted to come so badly but never got quite there. Her senses were extremely heightened as the monster teased her clit, never letting her reach climax. Her pussy flooded with its own lubricant. Her thighs were drenched in her own juices.

Everything was in a blur. There was one thing that kept her focused. That handsome face. The face of the Black Guard of the human world—Taki.

Why was she thinking about him now? *Am I . . . in love with him?* she wondered.

Another swipe of the tongue. A lungful of breath came through her gritted teeth with a hiss. She shivered.

The beast hesitated. Makie sensed the other presence,

too. Something different stood in the doorway. Her only thought was, *Is it the other one?* Had the second beast been released?

Whatever it was didn't seem to concern the beast. He continued to ravage Makie's body. She was so wet; she wanted him to fuck her. The fact she was wearing crotchless panties only added to the seduction. She was tied down and spread-eagle. Her vagina, her belly button, and the soft mounds of her breasts were exposed to anyone who wanted to look. If the truth were known, being naked in the open air only made Makie hotter. The idea that someone was watching her having sex turned her on.

The beast pushed itself into her with one smooth stroke. Makie shuddered at the thrill of being penetrated. It hit her G-spot and kept going, up through her abdomen. A shot of pain coursed through her body.

She was stunned. It snaked its way upward, through her lungs and out of her mouth. It was as if her entire body had been penetrated by a sizzling blade. He began to thrust, and Makie writhed in both pain and ecstasy. Her wrists and ankles twisted beneath their bonds until her skin tore apart. The beast's every movement was slow but dynamic. In her vagina. In her stomach. In her throat. Wiggling in her soft, warm body.

Makie called his name. ". . . Taki . . ." He was the only thing she had to hold on to.

It continued to move inside her, rubbing her every nerve ending. She could not take it anymore. She was convinced she was going to die having an orgasm.

The beast slithered its way back to the opening of her vagina—the stab of death never came. Makie was struck by a wave of fear not her own. It was not coming from the beast either. She looked at her feet, to the wall. Ranko stood there, staring at something, her eyes wide and full of horror and hate.

Makie moved her head so that she could see the place Ranko was looking. Someone, just out of Makie's field of vision, stood beside her.

"You little— You've come here to die? You're suicidal even as a dream!" Ranko said.

Renzaburo Taki's only reply to the fear-struck Ranko was a wide grin.

"Taki . . ." Makie whispered.

"At your service. You called me, and I heard you. You might make a good Dream Guard," Taki said to Makie.

"Thanks." Already she had reverted to her usual calm beauty.

"Get him!" Ranko shouted.

The invisible thing left Makie to follow Ranko's order. It looked up into the night and let out an unearthly, earth-shattering yell.

And the whole world—those who were dreaming and those who weren't—heard its cry and were frightened by its presence. People knew. Every living thing knew. They discovered that they were nothing but a dream. Their dreams were the dreams of dreams.

The beasts ruled the world. The world was the creation of the beasts.

The second beast was still by the doorway. It charged at its brother, who was still standing in front of Makie's open legs.

A bizarre series of objects fell to the ground between Taki and Ranko. Not objects—ghostly images. A vortex of dark, flashing with a nebula's brightness. A freakish fish with female arms and legs. A peaceful village in Brazil with people sitting at a dinner table. A warrior and knight fighting. A cityscape breaking out of a snow globe. A nanotube circuit, linking the planets in the solar system. A primitive animal that evolved into a man in a matter of seconds.

Taki and Ranko knew what they were. The images were the dreams being dumped by the beasts as they fought each other. The dreams were the excrement of the beasts, filth coming out of them. The whole universe and human beings were just shit.

While the beasts were distracted fighting each other, Taki released Makie. He looked over at the other table, to Tanna. His eyes were open and staring, but they saw nothing. The beast had driven him mad, and then taken his life. Taki would make sure Ranko paid for that.

"Oh, no, you don't. You won't get away that easily." Ranko waved her right arm in a large arc. Her black robe had dozens of thin, skin-like layers. Carried by an eldritch wind, the layers floated into the air and turned into clones of the witch, each holding a long sword.

"Taki?" Makie asked. Her legs were trembling after

her ordeal; she had trouble standing and needed to lean on him. "What are they?"

"Her clones," Taki answered. "But are they—"

One of the duplicates answered his unfinished question. Her sword swung down, sinking into the flesh of his arm, drawing blood.

"They are real," Taki muttered. "This is not a dream."

Suddenly they were all floating in the air. Hundreds of Rankos moved together, like black flower petals fluttering in the wind. They became flat and fused together, turning into a piece of black cloth. The cloth chased Taki and Makie. It wrapped around their legs, holding them fast. And then it turned into a black hand.

A flash of light appeared from Taki's right hand as he fired his gun. The air vibrated with a roar. All strength went out of the cloth hand, and they made a bad landing on the hard floor.

The real Ranko fell slowly, like a dried leaf caught in the wind. She had a black hole in her shoulder where the bullet had entered. Makie and Taki stood, breaking the hand that clung to their legs like deadwood. The wall of the rooftop was blocking them.

The hand shattered into pieces; the clones re-formed from the wreckage and came at Taki and Makie, brandishing their swords. "What's the matter, Black Guard?" they taunted in chorus. "Can't handle one old witch?"

Makie stepped forward. "This takes a woman. Leave it to me."

Without giving Taki the chance to talk her out of it, the beautiful demon confronted the witch.

The clones broke into condescending laughter. "What is this? What can you do?" Their faces hardened.

"I can beat you, that's for sure." Makie pressed her full lips onto her own pale arm. There was a streak of blood as she punctured her skin. She released her arm and pouted, her lips coated with her own blood. Without warning, small red dots appeared on the face of every ugly Ranko clone.

Taki knew what the dots were—droplets of blood.

Fearful of Makie's next move, the clones froze and reached for weapons. Makie's other hand rose. She stroked her forehead, as if brushing away an errant hair, before she brought her hand down to her lips. Blowing across her palm as if she were blowing the clones a kiss, she released dozens of strands of hair into the darkness. The hairs turned rigid and sharp, like a hundred needles. They stabbed the clones in the forehead, right in the drops of blood, as if each were a bull's-eye. The sea of clones turned back into pieces of cloth and fluttered to the ground.

"Y-you!" Ranko's curse came from beside Taki. Shirei Ranko stood at the corner of the platform, her back pressed against the wall.

"It's your turn." Makie smiled thinly, her fist still attached to her lips. She blew another kiss at Ranko, and more needle-hairs raced toward the witch.

Ranko jumped aside. The hairs missed, penetrating the wall and going limp. The next morning when the cleaning

woman arrived and saw the mess, she would hardly be able to believe her eyes.

That was, if tomorrow ever came.

"Get her!" Ranko's shriek seemed to come from all around them.

The responding roar cut through the night sky. The sound wave shoved back the witch's paper-thin body. It crashed into the wall and slumped down, leaving a trail of dark wetness on the orange surface. Ranko was dead.

"How . . . how did it . . ." Makie said, momentarily stunned.

Taki shook his head. "It's irrelevant. The beasts don't care who we are. They only want power."

"Why . . . ?" She held the last letter in a long drone and broke up.

Makie understood that the witch's curse had been broken. The little bit of the beast she had released was gone. She stood up and fell in with Taki, not hiding behind him.

Taki smiled. They were a team.

A sudden, cold wind whipped around the platform. It was not over. The beast had taken back the bit that Ranko had let out, only because he wanted to be whole when he destroyed the world. The dream rapist was coming out—fully. It sat in the fourth layer of the pot, was looking at them, looking at the world. Studying them like specimens under a microscope.

"What are we going to do?" Makie asked.

"Don't know. Wait and see," Taki replied.

"And then what?"

"Quiet."

"Someone's touchy," Makie said sarcastically.

Taki smiled as an oddly sad feeling sank in. There was no panic. He was ready to die. He knew it would happen here. He raised his right arm slowly and aimed his .44 Magnum at the pot. He focused all the Psy Power he had on it.

The monster must have sensed Taki there, because there was a wave of desire from the pot. The desire to destroy and humiliate. The monster climbed up and out of its prison.

Taki squeezed the trigger. The bullet flew from his gun and smashed into the wall. The beast had been there, but now it was gone.

Taki leaped straight into the air, lifting Makie with him. He did it with an incredible agility. Makie wondered what had caused him to move so suddenly. Then she realized.

The beasts were here.

One stood in front of Taki and Makie, the other behind. Something inexplicable stirred in the air, emanating from the two beasts—the first emotion Makie had felt from either of them. It was pure hatred, but not for the two humans. For each other. Their hatred spread from the platform in Tokyo and into the world, bringing destruction in its wake. On the other side of the world, a twister erupted on the rooftop of a building in the capital city of a small island. It grew rapidly, spreading from one

corner of the island to the other, howling from dawn until dusk, demolishing every living thing on the rock.

The manifestation of the beasts' rage was not limited to natural disasters. All over the world, lovers and married couples started killing each other—390,000 in America, 3,940,000 in Russia, 84,250,000 in Europe. Every one of them looked at their partner and saw a hideous creature. None of the survivors would ever again be able to have normal sex.

Animals were also affected. In a national park in Kenya, Mabonga, an old elephant, sank its tusks thirty centimeters into his partner, Kere. The *Roland*, a four-thousand-ton schooner cruising in the Arafura Sea, was swept away by a giant wave. The wave had been caused by thousands of great white sharks attacking each other, turning the sea crimson with their blood. The ocean was full of chunks of shark meat as males attacked females. The captain of the ship turned around to express his shock and surprise to his wife and was shot. As he lay on the floor dying, he saw at his door a creature with three arms, holding the pistol that belonged to the captain's wife. The captain's wife thought her husband was a slimy monster with eight giant tentacles.

The effect the beasts had on earth extended to the most basic of life forms. At a biological warfare laboratory on Wellington Street in London, black rabbits and guinea pigs suddenly attacked each other as a member of the staff was testing their blood serum. The fleas attached to the animals produced a mutated bubonic plague, five thousand times worse than the Black Death.

There was one exception to all of this hate and fear, one place the beasts did not reach. Yanagidani Hiroyuki and his wife, Tomiko, in Katsushika Ward were in bed having sex. The husband fucked his wife from behind as she moaned in pleasure. Hiroyuki watched Tomiko's huge hips moving out of the corner of his eye and thought about his legal wife. "She" actually had a huge cock, a thick chest, and five eyes that could see infrared rays. Tomiko's "husband" was a twenty-seven-year-old "man" who worked at a lesbian bar in Kamata. His tongue extended thirty meters and was capable of giving a computer an orgasm with one swipe.

The human race was on the verge of disappearing. Taki felt the two monsters clash in the air. The air pressure dropped suddenly, as if most of the oxygen had been pushed away from the platform. Suddenly Taki felt different. He regarded everything but himself as filthy and repulsive.

Women were disgusting in his eyes. The thought of making love with a woman was enough to make him ill. *My lover is drenched in raw sewage*, he thought. *If she touches me again, I will kill her.*

Someone pulled on his arm. Cocking back with the other, ready to fight, he turned around.

Makie's face, her beautiful, intelligent face, met his gaze. She looked profoundly sad and in pain. Her dark eyes glittered with the tears of the whole world.

"Taki?" she asked quietly.

It was enough to bring Taki back. Letting his Psy Power churn through his body, he sped across the platform toward the entrance, Makie following close behind.

The air stirred. The beasts continued to drop fragments of dream. They spread in every direction and rained down on Taki's and Makie's heads. They were hot as falling embers, scorching their skin. A second later it stopped. Something was different.

Taki realized he had turned completely into a dream. So had Makie.

"Damn," Taki said. "I am so sorry, Makie. I didn't want you to—"

His words were interrupted by a sudden wind. The strong current eddied around them, as if they were the center of a cyclone. Everything sped away like watercolors in the rain, leaving trails of color.

Saga Miyuki stood in the middle of the gloom.

"Saga." Taki couldn't hide the relief in his voice. He went toward his friend and partner to hug him.

Saga put up his hand. "Stay back," he ordered. "It's time. This is not the ending we hoped for. You can go back, though. You owe it to that looker over there. It's me who invited these two critters. When I'm finished with them, no matter how I do it, you go back. Promise me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Hey." Taki didn't like the sound of what Saga was saying. Something occurred to him. "Where did the other one come from?"

"It's the one from the box. The one we glimpsed in the Hospital yard."

"What the hell—they set it free?!" Taki was furious. How dare they endanger the world like that?

Saga shook his head. "It's done. Can't be undone. One of them has to go down or go back where it came from. The problem is the remaining one. It can't be killed except by its brother. Let's hope we can put it back in its cage."

"How can you possibly do that?" Taki asked, frantic. This was getting out of control quickly.

Saga's tone was matter-of-fact. "I'm entering their dreams."

Taki rolled his eyes. "The beasts *are* the dream. You don't know what you're saying."

"What if a dream has a dream? That's one of the biggest questions of modern physics. It's not too late to find out," Saga said.

"Stop it!" Taki said. "You're being stupid. You're going to get yourself killed."

"That's the general idea," Saga said. "But I'm taking at least one of them with me."

"Don't, Mr. Saga!"

When Saga heard Makie's voice, a smile appeared in the drunkard's hollow cheeks.

"Good-bye, princess. You two look cute together."

"Saga!" Makie cried again.

Saga ignored her plea. "Listen carefully. If I get to bring the surviving beast back into the pot, it will be your

job to shut the lid right away. You two work on it together," Saga said.

Taki sighed and bowed his head. He realized this was the only way. "Okay."

Saga clapped Taki on the shoulder. "You can do it. I know you can. Thanks for everything, Taki. Miss . . . Makie, was it?"

"Yes." Makie's voice throbbed with emotion.

Saga started to fade. "Do it!" he cried. He ran toward the beasts and jumped into the air. With one hand, he caught hold of one of the beasts. He and the beast fell from the sky, right into the pot.

The moment Saga disappeared, Taki and Makie were back in the real world. Wind saturated with eldritch energy whipped their cheeks. The spirit of the remaining beast surged upward, trying to get away from the wind. But it was not strong enough to pull away. Gradually, reluctantly, it, too, was sucked into the pot.

Taki took out his M29. "Makie."

"I know." Her hand was placed over his. The lid was slightly open, a crack of about five millimeters. There was a roar—they were fighting inside the pot. The two beasts and Saga.

Somehow Taki could see them fighting. Fangs bit into Saga's neck. The beasts produced dreams and Saga crumpled them. The two beasts became one thousand. One became one-third of an infinite number. Imaginary number concurred antilogarithm. Letters gobbled up Korona . . .

A gigantic amount of new history was born, displacing existing history. Taki tried to keep up, going over his own memories. The universe was trapped in a fossil of a trilobite and the Big Bang was created. It was 113,000,000,000 years ago. Time went back counterclockwise. America was located in the middle of the Eurasian continent, and the first person to find it died because his VVVVVVV had recurred and he was the picture of health again and . . .

Taki racked his brain, trying to hold on to facts that threatened to dissolve into the new history. Light speed? Three hundred thousand kilometers per second. The world sat on the back of a huge tortoise . . . the canal in Shangri-la was swept by a Type 8 cold virus and got married to a military base. The fire that burned Joan of Arc was in the pocket of a priest in England and became a book of scripture and then the first item of Chapter 12345678901234 in the Charter of the Earth.

Crazy with swirling thoughts, Taki shook his head. He wasn't sure what was real anymore.

Then a cool, rational thought popped into his head. He knew the correct history of the earth. Everything made sense.

Saga was fixing what the beasts had destroyed, editing history, setting things right.

"Quick!" Saga's voice rang across the night. "Now's your chance, Taki!"

This is for you, Saga, Taki thought. He pulled the trigger. The bullet, carrying plenty of Psy Power from this

world and the other, rocketed toward the pot. The lid moved, then swiveled around and settled into place.

The next moment, the two Black Guards, one human and one beautiful demon, were standing on an empty platform on a quiet, cold winter's night.

Taki slumped onto the ground. He let out a deep sigh. It was over.

A white hand rested on his shoulder. Gently. She had never touched him like that before.

"Mr. Saga . . ." Makie's voice floated into the night. "He's gone?"

Taki nodded and looked at the small, unassuming stone pot. Were the Dream Guard and the beasts still fighting inside? Would it continue until one of them died?

Taki put his gun away and dragged himself toward the pot.

The two men watched the platform through a flickering screen.

"We failed. It didn't work after all," the first said.

"Perhaps. But it will fall into place eventually. We should be celebrating," the younger man replied.

"The Dream Guard did his job."

"Just as we expected."

"Two hundred seventy-eight thousand turned into dreams and three hundred ninety-two million impotent—just like we expected?"

"In a sense . . . The world will get back on its feet soon enough. It's out of our hands. We should move on to the next problem."

Two men agreed in silence.

About the Author

Hideyuki Kikuchi is the author of *Demon City Shinjuku*, *Wicked City*, and *Vampire Hunter D*. He is considered to be the master horror writer of Japan by American fandom and is often compared to Stephen King.

It's the end of the world. Welcome to it.

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WICKED CITY

THE OTHER SIDE

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